Written by
Isshiki Ichika
Illustrated by fame

BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL
V

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"I can't. And besides, all of this is your fault, my lord..."

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V

WRITTEN BY

ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY

FAME

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 5

Illustrations by fame

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BERSERK OF GLUTTONY

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Chapter 1:
A Silent Change in the Air

THE REPAIRS TO SEIFORT'S Military District were almost complete. Rafale's assault had left the place in ruins, but finally, the hum of daily activity returned to the buildings within the district walls. Inside, researchers busied themselves with all the work they'd left behind, making up for lost time. Mugan, that soldier in Roxy's squadron, said that his own daughter had hardly slept since returning to her research. He hadn't seen her come home at all.

Mugan and I were at our favorite tavern, sharing a drink as he shared his woes. We'd first met in Galia, and he'd taken a liking to me immediately. Since then, he'd often invited me out for drinks. Mugan tended to ramble when he became drunk—usually about his daughter, Laine. She was old enough to marry, but had little interest in anything that wasn't ancient Galian technology. He drained his glass of wine and wept at the thought of her future.

"All I want is for her to settle down, maybe start a family," he said, looking piteously at the dregs in his glass. He vented all his worries at me because he thought I was the right guy to ask for advice, since Laine's current obsession was analyzing me and my Gluttony skill.

Mugan had it all wrong. Laine wasn't interested in me at all. She only cared about my skill, Gluttony, and my black sword, Greed. I tried to let him know, but he just wouldn't listen.

"So, Fate," said Mugan, "what were you and Laine up to today?"

"Oh, you know, the same as always," I said.

"Oh…really?"

"Look, if you don't believe me, come with me next time. It'll be so much easier."

Earlier that day, just after lunch, I'd gone to Laine's laboratory for a full-body analysis. She'd strapped me into an odd helmet hooked up to a heavy-looking piece of machinery beyond my understanding and told me that she was going to measure my brain waves. During a previous visit, she'd poked me with needles and taken blood samples. No matter how you looked at it, I was little more than a guinea pig for her experiments. She ran similar experiments with Greed, but the black sword didn't suffer in the slightest—she made sure to clean and polish him after every test. As a matter of fact, he was usually up on cloud nine because Laine kept paying him compliments.

"Oh, speaking of," I said to Mugan. "If you see Laine, could you tell her I can't go to the laboratory tomorrow? Something's come up."

“Yeah, I’ll tell her,” said Mugan. “I did hear about that ‘something’ from Lady Roxy, you know. Strange things afoot in the Hobgoblin Forest, eh? She said something weird’s happening to the goblins over there.”
“Whatever it is, it’s causing no end of trouble for the merchants traveling to and from the kingdom. We’ve already seen a few victims. The problem hasn’t gotten out of hand yet, but I think it might be better to nip it in the bud quickly.”
“Still, feels a bit like overkill to send two holy knights to take care of a goblin problem…”
Mugan’s brow creased as he drank the last of the bottle. The barkeep quickly swapped our empty bottle of wine for a fresh one and studied us, concern crossing his features.
“It’s a troubling state of affairs, isn’t it?” he said. “Even the adventurers who come in here are talking about it. My business relies on those merchants, so I hope you take care of it quickly. I’m counting on you, Fate.”
“I’ll do my best,” I said. “Have you had any trouble so far?”
“Not yet,” said the barkeep. “But I’ll tell you what, the last thing I want around here is another lich like that Corpse thing.”
The wine I was trying to drink burst from my mouth in a cloud of surprise. The barkeep left to take another customer’s order, a self-satisfied grin plastered across his face. My shoulders slumped as I wiped the wine off my face with a sleeve. Mugan chuckled.
“Even I know about that lich, you know. Say what you want, but you can’t deny that wherever you go, you leave destruction in your wake.”
“Would you please lay off?”
Mugan laughed heartily, a mischievous glint in his eye. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said as he poured me another glass of wine. “But in all seriousness, we’re all counting on you tomorrow. You better be ready.”
There was something about Mugan’s knowing gaze. I’d seen that face before, and it rarely meant good news. I suddenly had a feeling that I knew exactly what he was getting at.
“No way,” I cried, color draining from my face. “You don’t mean *she’s* going to be there, do you?”
“Ah, you really are a sharp one, Fate. But it is what it is. It’s about time you got a taste of my daily struggles, anyway. This time, it’s *your* duty to keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t get in Lady Roxy’s way.”
I cried out in dismay. The girl with the flaming sword was coming. In her eyes, I was her archnemesis. I could usually rely on Mugan to step in and keep her on a short leash, but not this time.
“Why aren’t you coming along as well?” I asked. “You’re her babysitter, aren’t you?”
“I am no such thing! Besides, I’ve been assigned to travel with Lady Eris. We’ll be away from the kingdom for a time. Surely you already knew about it.”
“First I’ve heard.”

Eris had told me that she was nearing the end of her investigation into Rafale's research, but would tell me the details later. So that was all I knew. However, according to Mugan, Rafale had another base of operations. It was located to the east of Seifort, in the mountainous city of Tenburn. Mugan's orders were to accompany Eris on her investigation.

I'd never been to Tenburn, so I asked what sort of place it was. Nestled between towering mountains, the city had an elevation of nearly ten thousand feet above sea level. The remote city was inaccessible except via a few treacherous mountain paths. People chose to live in such a bleak place because there were innumerable rare minerals and ancient Galian relics hidden in the surrounding mountains. Many traveled to the place hoping to excavate and claim those lost technological artifacts. Though it was never publicly acknowledged, Tenburn was of vital importance to the kingdom. Caches of Galian tech still lay strewn across the various domains of the kingdom. I had previously assumed that the kingdom sourced any Galian technology used in research from Galia itself. Mugan's description made me rethink my assumptions.

"I see," I said. "Well, then, guess I can look forward to a pretty spectacular Tenburn souvenir."

"It's not a holiday, Fate. I won't have time to go shopping for you!"

"Yeah, I know. I have a feeling you'll be okay if you're traveling with Eris, but still—don't do anything rash, okay?"

"I won't. I saw what happened the last time you guys got into a fight. I intend to be very careful."

We clinked our glasses, drank our wine, and talked about the state of the kingdom's army now that Eris had revealed herself as Seifort's true ruler. Soon enough, the talk again returned to the subject of Mugan's daughter. Mugan was a stern-looking man, but when it came to his beloved Laine, his face softened into a beatific smile. I wondered if it was the same with all parents.

I looked around the tavern at the red-faced merchants and boisterous adventurers who filled the place with their drinks and chatter. You would have been hard-pressed to find a single person there who didn't think a time of peace was returning to Seifort.

Yet in truth, something full of menace crept our way, slowly but steadily. At that time, we didn't have the slightest clue what was coming.

***

I woke up the following day to a sprightly, effervescent voice. Recently, my dreams had been spent on a spiritual plane of sorts—a mental arena in which I sparred with Greed. Well, it usually started with only Greed, but as the battles grew more chaotic, Luna inevitably became irritated and joined the fray. Of course, because she was the architect of that place, she alone

was invincible. Every fight ended with me and Greed feebly waving our white flags of surrender and begging for mercy.

“Look at you, sleepyhead! Time to get up! Rise and shine, my lord!”

It was Sahara. I recognized the maid’s headband she wore. Though she was only nine years old, she was already serious and responsible. Indeed, she was the very definition of reliability. We’d met way back before I even became a servant at Hart Manor.

Back then, I’d only just realized my powers of Gluttony when I saw her being kidnapped. I’d tried to help her, but ended up getting both of us into deeper trouble. The kidnapper had possessed a higher level than I did, but Greed helped me turn the tables. In the end, I killed that villain and brought Sahara safely back to her orphanage.

I found her again when I was seeing off the first caravans headed for the Barbatos estate. Because Sahara was one of the forsaken, she was also eligible to move there and had actually boarded one of the first caravans. As soon as she saw me, she ran over. Ever since I saved her, she had regretted not being able to thank me properly.

Sahara said she wanted to help me in return and said she’d do anything. Those words had left me feeling awkward and in a bind—I had no clue what to tell her. Fortunately, Aaron happened to be listening, and he had an idea. It was the sort of idea that transformed my worries and doubts into the charming details of a now-fond memory.

Aaron told Sahara that Barbatos Manor needed more servants, and we weren’t sure what to do about it. He went on to say that if she had so much energy and enthusiasm, she was welcome to work for us as a maid. I stood there dumbstruck as Sahara enthusiastically agreed to Aaron’s suggestion.

Since then, Sahara’s light-pink hair had grown long enough that she tied it into pigtails to keep it out of the way of her work. They bobbed as she looked down at me. I still hadn’t gotten used to her daily routine of waking me from my slumber.

“Uh…morning,” I said.

“Good morning!”

I got up and yawned while Sahara quickly got to work straightening my sheets and making my bed.
“I guess Aaron already left?” I asked.
“Yes, he went to the castle, as always. Oh, but Memil went with him today.”
“I see. So they went together…”
I had to admit, I was a little relieved. It had been a month since Memil arrived as both a new servant of the manor *and* my new little sister. I would have been lying if I said our relationship had improved since then. When she first arrived, she’d called me “brother,” but I just couldn’t get used to it. I instructed her to call me “my lord” instead, just like Sahara did.
Memil and I had a complicated past, and we still couldn’t work out what our relationship was and how close or distant we should be with one another. It wasn’t like we hated each other; it was more like we were both too worried about how to act. That’s why it was always especially awkward when Aaron went to the castle and Sahara went out shopping or on some errand. I ended up pacing nervously whenever Memil and I were left alone in the spacious Barbatos Manor. It made me want to run and hide in my room.
I knew I had to resolve this situation, but I just kept avoiding it instead. I had a feeling that Memil also wanted to patch things up. Every now and again, I’d feel her staring at me. She’d open her mouth like she was about to speak, then give up and go somewhere else.
“If you want to mend things with Memil, why don’t you just invite her out for a meal?” said Sahara. “It’d be easier for me to focus on work if the two of you would just get along already.”
“Yeah…you’re exactly right.”
There I was, being lectured by a nine-year-old. It was truly a pathetic sight.
I looked at Greed, leaning against the wall. I got the distinct feeling that the black sword was cackling as he watched me standing there and fretting.

Chapter 2:
My Teacher, Miss Roxy

ONCE I FINISHED GETTING DRESSED, I ate breakfast with Sahara. Instead of eating with Aaron, she had decided to wait for me.

The dining hall had been completely remodeled. It was a beautiful space with wooden walls and flooring that lent a feeling of natural warmth. We'd had the option to remake it all with marble, but unfortunately, the Barbatos family wasn't quite *that* wealthy. We'd used the better part of our savings to restore the Barbatos estate.

On the bright side, we were starting to make a profit thanks to high-quality rock salt, which was plentiful in the mountain near our estate and could be sold to neighboring domains. In order to secure other sources of revenue, we were also putting effort into growing and cultivating spices. Set was helping us out, having learned the ins and outs of growing spices from his travels. I would never forget the day Set laid out all the facts and presented his plans. I'd never seen him so passionate. According to him, the soil around the estate was well-suited to the task, so he got us started on cultivating spices that were in high demand. This included black pepper, red pepper, and turmeric. No other estates produced a steady supply of these spices, so if we were successful, we would corner the market and could expect a handsome profit.

When I was last at the estate, I'd had a chance to tour the spice farms for myself. Everything was going smoothly. It looked like it would be a good harvest. Set said that he would come to the kingdom to report when they were harvested, and he'd bring samples with him. I had high hopes. It was important to ensure that the farming could yield steady returns, because that would mean we could focus on improving the estate's other industries.

Thanks to Roxy, we were also getting help growing grapes. It was a time-consuming endeavor, but hypothetically, we'd be able to make wine on the lands of the Barbatos estate. We weren't going to produce anything nearly as excellent as the Hart estate's wine anytime soon, but it still seemed like a job worth doing.

I found myself thinking about all of this as I gobbled down my breakfast, and Sahara started laughing at me.

"I'm glad to see you looking so happy," she said. "I bet it's because you're meeting with Lady Roxy today, isn't it?"

Her comment caught me as I was swallowing a mouthful of bread. It lodged itself firmly in my throat, sending me into a coughing fit.

"Finished!" said Sahara, who began clearing her plates and cleaning up.

"What are you up to today, Sahara?" I asked as I hurriedly devoured my own bread and soup. "The usual?"

"Yup. I'm going to help out at the orphanage."

Though Sahara had become a maid at Barbatos Manor, she still frequented the orphanage where she had been raised. The boys and girls there weren't her blood relatives, but Sahara looked after them as if they were her own family. I would have liked to give them all a home at the Barbatos estate, but we didn't yet have the means to host large numbers of young children.

"I'll take you there," I said. "The kingdom is getting safer by the day, but the slums are still pretty dangerous at times."

"Thank you!"

I took my plates in hand and went with Sahara to the kitchen. We put our plates in the sink and washed them side by side. The kitchen was incredibly spacious—easily larger than the entirety of the little run-down hut I had once called my home. Even the sink was wide enough for five people to use at the same time. I worried that the place was too big for Aaron, Sahara, Memil, and myself, but when I'd mentioned it to Aaron, he only laughed.

"It might feel that way to begin with," he'd said, "but it will feel smaller as our family grows and we employ more staff."

I'd never experienced anything like that before, but I gathered that, with time, I'd see what Aaron meant.

After breakfast, I went back to my room and took Greed in hand. "Sorry to keep you waiting," I said.

"I'm dying here. I'm so bored."

"Don't be like that. We're going to the Hobgoblin Forest today. Can't fight monsters on an empty stomach."

"Always the Glutton."

"You know it. Anyway, let's go. Sahara is waiting."

After the battle with Rafale, my armor had been left in tatters, but Jade Stratos had repaired it for me. He was an armorer and craftsman based in the frontier city of Babylon at the Galian border. We had an exclusive contract: No matter how damaged my armor got, he always fixed it for me. Jade's fame had grown by leaps and bounds, and he was now regarded as one of the finest craftsmen in Babylon. The reason for that was dead simple: I'd worn his gear when I slew the Divine Dragon. As soon as the adventurers of Babylon heard that Jade was my personal armorer, they rushed to his shop in droves. Even with all his new-found fame, Jade wasn't the slightest bit arrogant, and he remained focused purely on his craft.

Jade's passion for craftsmanship knew no bounds. Though my repaired gear looked no different, he'd strengthened it in a number of subtle ways. My jacket and pants in particular were dramatically improved thanks to the mythril he'd woven into them. Mythril was an expensive metallic fiber capable of carrying and conducting arcane energies. I hadn't yet tried it out in the heat of battle, so I didn't know just how useful it was, but based on Jade's description—and the obsessive enthusiasm he had poured into his letter—I had high hopes.

I found Sahara waiting by the front door with a large rucksack. The entrance to our manor was now decorated with a carpet dyed with calming, welcoming colors.

“Well, shall we go?” I asked.

“Let’s!”

As we left the manor, I couldn’t help but notice the weight of Sahara’s rucksack. I asked her if she’d like me to hold it, but she shook her head.

“I’m your maid, remember? I can’t have my master carrying my things for me.”

“Well, if you insist, but if you get tired, tell me, okay?”

“I’ll be fine!”

Sahara rarely relied on Aaron or me for anything, perhaps because she’d lived her life having to solve her problems on her own. Then again, we’d only started living together fairly recently. Perhaps she’d loosen up in due time.

Sahara kept up her energetic pace all the way to the gate that separated the Holy Knight District from the others. We would have to travel through the Merchant District to reach the Residential District. We greeted the soldiers standing guard at the gate and passed through. As the head of the Barbatos family, everyone knew my face, so I could pass through freely, and because Sahara came and went so frequently, the guards were used to seeing her too.

“Good morning, Miss Sahara!”

“Good morning!” Sahara replied, her head bobbing as she bowed.

I was quite surprised. The smiling guards who rushed to greet Sahara were nothing like the stern guards who had never once greeted me with anything less formal than “We’re indebted to your service, sir!” I felt a twinge of envy. I imagined the guards rushing up and smiling at me in the same way… and I realized I was fine without the attention. Sahara flashed the guards another wide smile and passed through the gate.

“Come on, my lord,” she said. “Let’s go!”

“Uh…yeah,” I said, still mulling over what I’d just seen. “On my way.”

As we walked through the Merchant District, I felt the need to ask Sahara about it. “Are they always like that? The guards?”

“Yes, and sometimes they even give me sweets. I like it when they do that—the sweets make for nice treats for the kids at the orphanage.”

She spoke like it was just something that happened occasionally, but her words reminded me of something Aaron had said. He’d leaned over to me and murmured, “In the future, that girl’s going to grow up to be somebody incredible.”

Seeing Sahara like this now, I had a feeling I truly understood his meaning.

Sahara walked on without even glancing at the shops and stalls lining the streets of the Merchant District. I thought she’d go on like that all the way to the Residential District, but she did stop in front of one particular stall. When I took a peek at what she was looking at, I found that the stall sold

cookies, all of them baked with generous amounts of sugar and butter. Even though I wasn't usually into cookies, the sweet scent wafting through the air was overwhelmingly enticing. Sahara continued to gaze longingly at the cookies in their various shapes.

"Let me guess…you want a cookie?"

Sahara jumped a little, startled by my question, but she quickly moved on.

"No. I don't."

I walked over to the cookie stall and bought a basketful. I also bought two additional cookies, which the merchant bagged separately. Sahara was always doing chores around Barbatos Manor, *and* she was helping out at the orphanage. Perhaps I was sticking my nose where it didn't belong, but I thought it was nice to do this kind of thing once in a while.

"Sahara," I said, catching up. "I bought this to thank you for all your hard work. You can give them to the kids at the orphanage."

"Wow, are you sure? Thank you, my lord!"

Sahara's eyes were like saucers as she looked at the basket, and it brought a smile to my face. She was young, but she'd had to grow up quickly, and sometimes I worried that she was pushing herself too hard. It made me happy to see that sometimes she could just go back to being a kid again.

We picked at the basket of cookies as we headed into the Residential District. They were even better than I expected. I'd thought they were made with sugar, but they were actually sweetened with honey. The natural sweetness spread through my mouth and healed my bones, weary from my daily training ordeals. I was certain the butter they'd used was freshly churned too. The cookies were solid when you put them in your mouth, but they soon melted into a smooth and pleasant aftertaste.

"Wow, these are really good, my lord!"

"Yeah, we should totally buy them again, don't you think?"

"Yes!"

We were happily munching away (while also making sure to leave enough for the kids at the orphanage) when a familiar, dignified voice stopped us in our tracks.

"My, don't those cookies look scrumptious?"

"Roxy!"

"Uh…hello, Lady Roxy."

Roxy walked toward us, her eyes darting between Sahara and myself. We hadn't done anything bad or mean or criminal, yet I couldn't help but feel somehow guilty under her gaze.

"Fay, you know we have to investigate the Hobgoblin Forest today. What are you doing, snacking on cookies and taking a leisurely stroll?"

"Uh…well, you see, I'm just taking Sahara here to the orphanage. And then I thought, well, why don't I bring a gift along for everybody there, you know? Oh, uh, by the way…this is for you, Roxy."

I took one of the separately bagged cookies and passed it to Roxy. The instant I did, her demeanor changed completely. Her face bloomed into a bright smile as she looked at the bag in her hands.
“Oh my, for me? I’m so happy. Well, then, I suppose I had best accompany the two of you to the orphanage!”
“Oh, um…thank you very much for being so considerate, Lady Roxy,” said Sahara.
Sahara’s new escort was one of the most well-known people in the kingdom, and now that she had holy knights on either side of her, beads of sweat appeared on Sahara’s forehead as the eyes of passersby trained upon her.
“This makes me nervous,” she said.
“Oh, this is practically nothing at all,” said Roxy.
“Th-that’s because you’re Lady Roxy… My lord, help?”
“Give it up, Sahara. Once Roxy decides to do something, she won’t listen to anyone else.”
“What are you doing back there?” said Roxy. “Let’s get going!”
“Coming!” Sahara and I cried in unison.
The high-spirited Roxy led the way, and we soon arrived at the orphanage. It had been built in the slums, so it was nothing special by any stretch of the imagination. The roof was damaged in several places, and rain likely got inside when the weather was bad. I’d offered to help the nuns who ran the orphanage, but they declined. “You’ve already done so much,” they assured me. The nuns had come this far by the strength of their own will and volition, and they weren’t quick to accept further support.
Basket of cookies in hand, Sahara scampered off toward the children as soon as we arrived. Judging from the clamor of excited voices, I gathered that my present was something of a success.
Roxy and I conversed with the older nuns. We discussed the current state of the slums and their safety, how the kids were doing, and how the orphanage was going in general. As we talked, one of the nuns mentioned that they were having trouble with the kids’ education now that they had lost their only teacher. Recently, the young person who had been tutoring the kids had left to return to their village. Of course, the nuns could teach basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, but they weren’t experienced in much more beyond that.
When Roxy heard this, she volunteered to act as a substitute until the nuns could secure someone more permanent. I was a little worried, not because Roxy couldn’t teach or didn’t know how, but because she was a high-ranking holy knight with a busy schedule.
“Are you sure you can handle that even with your daily responsibilities at the castle?”
“It won’t be a problem,” Roxy said. “Recently, Eris took a closer look at how the kingdom is run to ensure that holy knight duties are divvied up evenly between all of us. I’m not swamped with work and drowning in responsibilities like I was before she arrived.”

“I see. Well, do your best! What should we call you? Miss Roxy?”
“That’s fine, but please be sure to attend our first lesson.”
Our first lesson? I suddenly realized that I was going to be a teacher too. But that could never work. I only knew the basics of reading and writing. My math skills weren’t any better. I’d be of no help to the nuns.
Roxy must have registered the confusion on my face. “I think you might be getting the wrong idea, Fay. I want you there strictly as a student. Now that you’re the head of the Barbatos family, I’m going to make sure you have the learning to go with the rank!”
“Please, you know I’m no good when it comes to studying, Roxy.”
“That’s *Miss* Roxy to you!”
“What?! Class has already started?!”
What exactly did Roxy intend to teach me? I was petrified, because I didn’t really know much of anything.
Then Roxy whispered in my ear. “If you can’t keep up, you’ll get private lessons back at the manor.”
From the tone of her voice, I got the distinct feeling that if I didn’t do well enough, she wasn’t going to let me sleep.

Chapter 3:
Not Your Ordinary Goblins

AFTER SEEING SAHARA to the orphanage, Roxy and I headed for the western gate, located in the busy Merchant District. The gate was originally where Roxy, Miria, and I had all planned to meet, but because Roxy and I had bumped into each other on the way, that left Miria waiting for us when we finally arrived. I had a feeling she wouldn't be pleased about it. Indeed, I expected the entirety of her rage to be focused directly at me.

I asked Roxy about Miria as we walked, while Roxy gazed with great interest at the variety of goods on display in the various stalls.

"I've been wondering this for a really long time," I said, "but why is Miria so fixated on you? I don't know whether to call it protective or possessive."

Roxy grinned. "She's always been like that, going back to when we met."

"Sounds tough…"

Miria glued herself to Roxy's side given the slightest opportunity. She'd been like that for the five years they'd known each other. It had to be because Roxy was so good to the people who worked for her. I worried that perhaps Miria was taking advantage of her good-natured heart. I must have frowned without realizing, because Roxy surprised me by playfully gripping my nose between her fingers.

"Don't tell me… Are you actually jealous, Fay?"

"Huh? Uh—no, I don't mean it like that, but…"

I felt my cheeks reddening and my face growing hot. Miria was always with Roxy, and I often watched them with a little envy. That must have been why my thoughts weaved the path they did. Roxy had shone a light on the feelings at the bottom of my heart, and I was a little bewildered. Roxy looked satisfied with herself, though, so I decided that was fine. After all, I'd promised myself that I wouldn't lie to her anymore.

"But yes, I am a little jealous, actually," I said.

"What?"

"Well, I want to spend more time with you too!"

"Fay! Don't say such things so loudly—not here on such a busy street…"

The people passing by on the street suddenly stopped and their stares zeroed in on us. Even though she was used to being stared at by the citizens of the kingdom, Roxy's face turned red. Mine was no different. I was as embarrassed to say it as Roxy was to hear it.

"Your face is red, Roxy," I said.

"You're one to talk."

We nodded in agreement, then fled the scene as quickly as we could. We must have looked like a couple of crazy, inexplicable holy knights to the people on the street. It was such a ridiculous sight that Roxy and I burst into laughter.

“If you want to be with me more, Fay, then I’d be more than happy to give you your first private lesson today at Barbatos Manor.”
“You’re talking about studying, aren’t you?”
“But of course!” Roxy said, her chest puffed up with pride, “I’ll make sure you get a thorough, all-encompassing education!”
Today? Does that mean…I might not actually be allowed to sleep?
My stats were much, much higher than they had once been. Since reaching holy knight levels, my stamina was off the charts. I could go a night without sleep and be absolutely fine. However, the idea of being made to wade through studying all my worst subjects for a whole night without sleep was utterly terrifying.
“Really, Fate, there’s no need to worry,” Roxy said, clearly discerning my apprehension. “Indeed, things will go exactly as you fear: No sleep for you tonight.”
Then she winked at me. It was overwhelmingly cute, but the difference between her expression and the words she spoke was almost too cruel. I realized then that the more we talked about it, the more she’d make me study. With that in mind, I decided to run to the western gate, but Roxy caught my left arm and pulled me close with a giggle.
“Don’t think you can run off that easily. I’ve let you get away for much too long.”
She put an emphasis on those last words. *Too long*. Was she talking about Galia? Was she talking about before that? I wanted to ask, but there was a seriousness in Roxy’s eyes. It was all too much for my brain to handle. I resigned myself to my fate, and Roxy patted me on the head with a satisfied smirk on her face.
“There, there,” she said. “But I must say, you certainly have gotten taller, haven’t you? When you were a servant, you were shorter than me. But now, here I am, looking up at you.”
Roxy put a hand on her own head and brought it toward me for comparison. When we’d met in Galia, I realized that I’d gotten taller than her, but it seemed like I’d grown a little taller since then as well. It was funny to think that even though it was my own body, I didn’t notice it changing until somebody else pointed it out.
“Back when I was working for the Vlerick family, I was barely able to feed myself. But since then, I’m eating much better. I’m even eating meat now.”
“Hm, yes. I see, I see,” said Roxy, suddenly feeling my left arm as if to confirm what I was saying.
“Huh? Roxy!”
“It’s true; you’ve grown very strong. It’s likely thanks to all the training you do with Aaron every day. You’ve really developed a true adventurer’s body.”
“Roxy, you’re touching me too much!”
“Ah, my apologies,” she replied with her tongue poking out just so. “I lost myself for a moment there.”

But I knew that cheeky expression on her face, and it meant she was going to do it again.
We walked until the gate came into view. Past that, the lands stretched into wide, grassy plains. They were home to the goblins who harassed our traveling merchants. The western gate was the hub of trade in the city, and second in size only to the gate into the Military District. It was easily big enough for ten caravans to pass through side by side.
The western gate was usually a meeting place for adventurers. They got in the way of passing merchants as they created or joined hunting parties. However, there were no adventurers there anymore, and the stores that usually bustled with adventurers looking for equipment were desolate.
"It's worse than I thought," I said.
"Indeed. Oh, look, there's Miria."
We spotted Miria by her chestnut-colored hair. She gestured wildly with her hands as she argued with a merchant at an outdoor stall. Even in the early morning, her energy levels were as high as ever. It looked as though it was a food stall of some kind—the merchant passed Miria a big loaf of bread. Miria looked very pleased with herself, but the merchant looked broken. It seemed pretty clear that Miria had won that particular haggling battle.
Miria saw the two of us while she stuffed her face with bread. She waved her hands and ran over. "Lady Roxy! Lady Roxy!" she said, struggling to speak through the chewing. "Good morning!"
"Good morning, Miria."
"Are you eating or talking?" I asked. "Pick one, would you?"
"Ugh, it's you again. I was so taken by the divine Lady Roxy that I didn't register your presence."
"Hey. Surely you knew it was a team investigation. You had to know I'd be here."
"Oh, I heard. I just choose not to acknowledge your existence."
"Why, you—"
Miria hadn't changed a bit. She was always a handful. Just then, Roxy grabbed Miria by both cheeks.
"Ow! Lady Roxy, owww! Please stop!"
"Miria, please listen to me carefully. Today you and Fate are going to get along. This is very important work we're doing."
"Okayyy… Understood."
Miria had nowhere to retreat and no way to react after being scolded by her beloved Roxy. Her shoulders slumped and her spirits low, Miria tentatively reached her hand out to me—a peace offering in the form of a handshake. I was surprised, because I'd never seen this side of Miria before. I reached out and we shook hands, but…
"Uh, Miria, no need to put so much power into it. If I were a regular adventurer, you would have completely crushed my hand."

“I should have expected as much from the Domain of E. But with this gesture, we’ve made an important connection, so just like Lord Aaron, I’m headed for the Domain of E too!”
“It’s not as easy as that, you know.”
“Oh? Really?” Miria frowned at me, an earnest furrow creasing her brow. “It isn’t?”
If there was one thing you could say about Miria, it was that her strength of spirit dictated her way of life. Did she really think it was possible to create a bond with someone by trying to crush their hand? I’d have been shocked if that were all it took.
“Ugh, how disappointing,” said Miria. “I officially regret shaking your hand.”
“Oof, talk about cruel…” I said. “It’s like all you want to do is hurt my feelings.”
But Miria simply bounded toward Roxy, the person she revered above all others. We would have to find a way to work together. Mugan had asked me to keep an eye on her. Being that I was older, I figured I just had to grit my teeth and bear it.
“I’m so glad to see such a friendship blossom,” Roxy said, smiling as she strode toward the Goblin Grasslands. “Well, let’s get to it, shall we?”
“On my way, Lady Roxy!”
I knew precisely what was going to happen. It felt exactly the same as when we had traveled together to the great canyon of Galia. In short, Roxy would alternately scold and dote on Miria as we traveled. Miria was used to this now, so she wouldn’t try to change at all. It was a self-perpetuating cycle, and I gained a renewed appreciation for Mugan’s suffering.
“I haven’t forgotten that you saved me in Galia, so…today I’ll be a good partner,” said Miria.
Maybe she’s growing up after all, I thought. “Happy to hear it,” I said. “Glad to have your support.”
“But just so we’re clear, don’t bother trying to be kind to me or anything like that.”
“What do you mean?”
I didn’t get an answer. Miria simply ran back to Roxy’s side. I had no idea what she meant about “being kind.” As I walked on, thoroughly confused, Greed spoke up through my Telepathy skill.
“That girl,” he said, “she’s got her reasons, just like you did.”
“She doesn’t look like it.”
“She just doesn’t want to show it. Eerily similar to somebody else I know…”
“Ouch. Low blow, Greed.”
Greed cackled. “I’ve been with you from the beginning. I know you inside and out.”
Greed had been my constant companion ever since I bought him from a weapon stall in Seifort. We’d been together for less than a year, but a lot had happened in that short span of time. I didn’t know exactly what kind of

life Miria had lived before she joined the kingdom's army, but I knew that she'd grown up in an orphanage. Perhaps she'd gone through her own trials and tribulations, just like I had.

Past the gate, heading toward the grasslands, Miria acted as Roxy's loyal guard dog. Every time I wandered too close, she'd snap at me. She said she'd be a good partner, but that only seemed to apply to how she acted around Roxy. Not that I cared, really. I had a whole night of private lessons to look forward to…just Roxy and me, alone together.

Miria would be so jealous she might even cry tears of blood. I wore a devilish grin as the grasslands came into sight.

It had been a long time since I'd seen them, but I remembered the grasslands vividly. It was the very place I had first tested my powers of Gluttony. The long grass hid goblins of all types, and they multiplied fast. Or at least, that was what I thought. The fields we encountered now were different. Aside from the gentle, undulating waves of grass, we saw no movement in the fields. There was no trace of any kind of goblin at all. The grasslands were empty.

"How can this be? The goblins are nowhere to be seen," said Miria. "Lady Roxy, the reports claimed that the goblins were lower in number, but…"

"It's certainly strange. Unbelievable, considering their breeding habits. It hasn't been like this since the founding of the kingdom."

I nodded in agreement.

"Fate," said Greed. "Look to your feet. There are goblin footprints, and they all lead to the Hobgoblin Forest."

"You're right…"

I told Roxy and Miria, and with a shared nod, we turned our eyes to the dense outline of the Hobgoblin Forest.

"I don't know how to say it, but…I'm getting worse vibes than usual from that place," said Miria.

"There's a magical power emanating from it, and I don't like the feel of it," said Roxy. "What do you think, Fay?"

"We don't have a choice," I said. "We won't know what's happening in there unless we check it out for ourselves."

We unsheathed our swords and readied ourselves for a battle at any moment. Then we walked toward the Hobgoblin Forest—and the ominous magical energy that emanated from within.

Chapter 4:
A Crimson Full Moon

THE HOBGOBLIN FOREST was completely silent, but I felt innumerable eyes pressing down on us from the darkness of the distant trees. The pressure made my hair stand on end.

Miria saw my trepidation and stifled a chortle. “What’s the matter with you? So hesitant and careful all of a sudden. It’s just the usual goblins, isn’t it?”

“We’re here because this situation is *un*usual. Did you forget that?”

“Of course not! Need I remind you that I’m more than capable of handling myself?” Miria spun her flamberge around as if to show off the fire magic that resided within it.

“That’s why you’re here. We’re all counting on you, Miria,” I said.

“You can say that again!”

“I really am glad you’re here,” I continued. “Is there a more powerful magical blademaster in all the kingdom?”

“Oh, stop, I’m not *that* powerful…” Miria giggled.

Her expression suddenly softened. It seemed that she had a weakness for compliments. She was a simple girl at heart.

I’d lifted her spirits with flattery for the sake of the party, but Roxy needed her focused, so she pinched Miria’s cheek.
“I said to be careful and on guard, Miria!” she said, her voice edged with annoyance. “What are you doing?!”
“Sorry…”
“But we do have to be very careful. Listen. It’s quiet, eerily so.”
“It’s nothing like it used to be. This place always swarmed with hobgoblins.”
“Let’s head deeper into the forest,” said Roxy. “But be on guard. I can feel that we’re being watched.”
“Understood,” Miria and I said in unison.
“It’s like replying to my orders is the only thing the two of you are good at doing together,” Roxy muttered, shaking her head as she walked on.
I activated my Night Vision skill to help counteract the gloom of the forest. It was sure to improve things, if only a little. But as we moved deeper into the forest, the presence of the monsters retreated in turn. It felt like we were being lured somewhere. It also seemed that the goblins were moving with more order and control than usual.
“Do you think it’s a goblin king?”
“Who knows? But one thing’s for sure—goblin kings only ever act big and arrogant around regular goblins. I’ve never heard of one giving orders, let alone commanding a real horde.”
“Indeed.”
We walked until we reached the only clearing in the Hobgoblin Forest—a meadow carpeted in wildflowers. The remains of a huge, withered tree sprawled across the center of it. I knew this place very, very well. I had killed a goblin king here and unlocked Greed’s first level. Soon after, Greed’s second level had unlocked when I slew Hado Vlerick on the same ground. It was a place intertwined with my past. Greed must have been thinking the same, because his shrill laughter echoed through my Telepathy.
“Fate, you must really love this place! Maybe we should live here,” he said before bursting into laughter once more.
He spoke his mind, but there was something to his words too. There was something…fateful about this place.
We walked on, well aware that we were likely walking right into a trap. The aura of magic radiated from the forest around us. We were entirely surrounded.
Finally, they unleashed their attack. Our enemies rained arrows down on us, the shafts flying from every direction. I chopped them out of the air with my angular black sword, and I watched Miria and Roxy do the same. We had all been to and battled in Galia, and an attack like this was practically meaningless. When they finally tired of watching their arrows get cut out of the air, the goblins finally crept out from the tall grass of the forest.

There were the usual goblins and hobgoblins, but when I saw ten goblin kings emerge from the tree line, I was taken aback. How was it possible for so many of them to gather in one place?

Goblin kings are extremely territorial, yet here they are, seemingly cooperating without a problem, I thought. It was unsettling.

"There's something weird about the way they're approaching us," I said. "Roxy, I need you playing a support role in case something happens."

"Okay. I'll leave this to you and Miria, then."

"Understood!"

They were just goblins, but all the same, I gripped the black sword tight and cut them into bloody bits. All the while, I worried, unable to shake that bad feeling. Nonetheless, the familiar metallic voice echoed in the back of my mind, informing me of my rising stats. However, these goblins were little more than bland, tasteless snacks as far as my Gluttony was concerned. Only the goblin kings provided any sense of satisfaction.

"Getting lively, Fate!" said Greed.

"It's been a while since I had a good meal," I said.

I punched the hobgoblin before me until it was an unrecognizable mass of broken flesh, then leapt into the air with my sword raised. I let the momentum carry me toward a goblin king and removed its head in a spectacular arc of blood before it could flank Miria.

"Hey! That was mine!" Miria cried. "No kill stealing!"

"Complain all you want when we're done," I said.

"What?! You're the worst!"

I could see that Miria was much more accustomed to duels, not yet used to fighting whole hordes. She was having trouble deciding which foes to prioritize, and the uncertainty was evident in the subtle confusion of her bladework.

I noticed movement in the grass, and suddenly arrows once again flew at us even as we battled waves of goblins in melee.

Do these guys not even care about killing their own allies?!

More importantly, our party was only three strong, and we couldn't afford to be pulled into a battle of attrition while completely surrounded.

"Why all this dodging, Fate?" said Greed. "You're in the Domain of E. None of this can hurt you."

"That's rich. It was *you* who told me not to get into the habit of just eating attacks because one day it would come back to bite me!"

"Ha! Was just checking to see if you remembered! Dance then, Fate! Dance!"

Why did he expect me to forget when he only told me last night? I thought.

I fought evasively, weaving left and right, and sometimes using a hapless goblin as a living shield. Meanwhile, the impatient Miria began to get frustrated by the overwhelming numbers and make mistakes. It also impacted the strength of her strikes.

That was when Roxy swooped in for support to protect her soldier. “Focus, Miria! Not just with your eyes. Feel their presence and fight accordingly.”
“I’m sorry, Lady Roxy. I know, but—”
Miria was good with a blade, but she still couldn’t move, fight, or focus as Roxy instructed.
It would be good for her to get in some training with Aaron, I thought. I wondered if her fighting style was a consequence of all her battles partnered with Mugan, who could fill in the gaps in her technique. It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it was a disadvantage at present.
As I fought and dodged, I kept track of a very particular arcane signature. It was located about a quarter mile away from us, and it was using its position as a base from which to send magical energy toward us. There was no doubting it now—*that* was the root of this goblin attack, perhaps even something like their nest.
There was a time for investigation and there was a time for action. Now was the latter.
“Greed, are you ready?”
“Who do you think you’re talking to, Fate? I, the legendary Greed, was born ready. I’m just waiting for you to say when.”
I poured ten percent of my stats into the black sword and readied the Bloody Ptarmigan attack. As my stats drained from my body, Greed transformed into an ominous black bow, which I aimed toward the south. Just as I pulled back on the bowstring, a pillar of red light appeared right where I was aiming.
“What?!”
“Fay, look down!”
“Huh? What is this?”
Another pillar of light began to coalesce where we all stood. The red light sent a chill down my spine. Anyone caught in that light was sure to suffer some kind of attack. But perhaps not if I attacked first.
“Miria, get out of here!”
“Lady Roxy!”
Roxy quickly grabbed a hold of Miria and threw her out of the light. The goblins, too, ran away.
“*Fate!*” Greed shouted. “*Fire!*”
I released the bowstring, unleashing the Bloody Ptarmigan. It ripped up the earth as it flew into the pillar of red light, and then swallowed it entirely in its explosion.
“Did we kill it?”
“I don’t know,” Greed said. “I don’t know what magic that was, but it looks like you interrupted the spell.”
“Just in the nick of time, then.”
All that remained was the tiniest glow of red light shining upon me and Roxy. Even as the light faded, I felt no effects from whatever spell that was supposed to be.

“What was that?” Roxy asked. “Some kind of attack?”
“Greed doesn’t know either,” I said. “But it seems like it was what the goblins were aiming for. They might have failed, but they retreated as soon as it happened.”
“You saved us, Fay. That technique you used…it’s enormously powerful.” Roxy stared at the marks left by the Bloody Ptarmigan. Then she suddenly seemed to remember something. “The Hart family estate… So this is what you used to decimate the northern valley.”
I groaned. “I am *so* sorry about that, really.”
“It’s fine. After all, you were doing it to protect the villagers from a kobold attack. Your attack now was no different. I’m sure the kindly queen of the kingdom will forgive you a little destruction.”
The Hobgoblin Forest was one of the kingdom’s sources of fresh water, and destruction of the natural habitat was prohibited. Mugan had warned me about that, so I’d tried my best to avoid doing so. Fortunately, the Hobgoblin Forest was huge. In terms of destruction, the Bloody Ptarmigan attack had covered a space that was a hundred feet wide and over a quarter mile long. I was sure that if I apologized, Eris would simply laugh at me and shrug it off.
“All the same,” said Roxy, “perhaps it’s not the best idea to provide Eris with any evidence of wrongdoing.”
“Exactly what I was thinking,” I said.
Roxy was careful to monitor my extraordinary stat totals and the way I channeled them. This time it was fine, but even I knew it was better to keep the use of Greed’s secret techniques to a minimum. It was just hard to ignore that Greedy voice in my head, always pushing me to fire whenever the opportunity arose.
“Fate! Just one more time!” Greed said, as if on cue. “You have to fire the Bloody Ptarmigan again just to make sure!”
“Were you even listening to what Roxy just said?”
“Does it matter? Fire, Fate! Fire!”
Greed was never satisfied until I got so close to the line that I managed to cross it again, so I ignored him as I looked to the south. I couldn’t feel the spellcasting monster’s presence anymore, but I didn’t know if I’d actually killed it.
“Let’s head over to ground zero to investigate. Miria, are you good to go?” asked Roxy.
“Ready,” she replied, her eyes downcast. She’d been less effective in battle than she’d hoped. She even needed to be rescued by Roxy. Clearly, it had hit her pretty hard. I didn’t feel like I could leave her like that, so I opened my mouth, but as soon as I did so, Miria backed away from me.
“Just leave me alone!” she said.
Miria could be hard to handle, and sometimes she reminded me of Myne. That girl was always silent, leaving me to do most of the talking.

Where is she now? I wondered. Myne was ridiculously powerful, so I wasn't worried about her getting hurt, but whenever I thought of her last words to me, some feeling stabbed into my chest. At times, I wondered if I should have gone after her, but I knew that if I had, I wouldn't have survived. I had a feeling that if that had happened…the situation would only have worsened.

Shin, the white-haired boy with the black spear, was trying to do something—something massive. It seemed Myne wanted the same thing, so I knew she was with him. Eris had put feelers out, so if anything strange happened, she'd know. That meant all I could do until then was keep training and readying myself for when it *did* happen.

"She's so difficult…" I muttered as I watched Miria run to Roxy's side.

"Give it up, Fate," said Greed, his voice serious for a change. "You're not suited to that kind of thing. Remember Roxy and all the twists and turns you had to go through for that to work itself out?"

"Don't remind me."

"It's the same thing. But if you really want to make yourself useful, start by taking a good look around you."

I heaved a long sigh. There was Miria, yes, but there was also Memil Vlerick. Well, she wasn't a Vlerick anymore, now that her family had essentially been abolished. Some time had passed since she'd arrived at Barbatos Manor as Aaron's adopted daughter, but I still didn't know how she felt.

"Make your mistakes while you're still young, that's what I say. All this fretting, and you'll only end up bald from pulling all your hair out!"

"Hey!"

Sometimes Greed said the scariest things. I had every intention of aging just like Aaron: with a full mane of thick, luscious hair.

While I bickered with Greed, Miria looked back at me and said, "You're so creepy."

"What?!"

Miria's words really stung. Roxy just stood there, watching with a grin.

"You think so too, right, Lady Roxy?" Miria looked to Roxy with an eager grin of her own, hungry for her approval.

But Roxy just shook her head. "You mustn't say such things, Miria. It's very important to Fay."

"You mean the way he whispers sweet nothings to his sword? Sometimes he even chuckles! It *is* creepy."

"I can't help it!" I said. "If I don't use my Telepathy, I can't hear what Greed has to say!"

Miria then pointed a finger directly at me. "Don't you dare pry into my private thoughts with that Telepathy."

"I won't! I've got it perfectly under control!"

"Somehow I doubt that!"

Miria had zero faith in me, yet she was completely fine around Mugan's daughter Laine, who also had the Telepathy skill. In any case, Miria kept walls up around her that I couldn't easily bypass, and she made that distance between us known as we arrived at ground zero, which also looked to be the goblins' origin.
After launching the Bloody Ptarmigan, I'd known I killed something because the metallic voice told me of my stat increase. The thing was, I didn't feel like I had hit the real source of all that magic. We found the charred, dismembered remains of goblins and hobgoblins scattered around, along with what appeared to be a magical seal drawn into the earth. Unfortunately, because of the strength of my attack, the left half of the seal had been completely blown away.
Roxy pulled a notebook from within her breastplate and sketched what remained of the seal. "Let's have Laine investigate this seal when we next see her. We'll also need her to make sure that red light didn't have any lingering effect on us."
"Good idea, but does it have to be Laine?"
"What's wrong, Fay? You seem a bit distraught."
"She always says she's conducting a diagnosis or running a test, but it's like she just gets up really close and touches me everywhere…"
"That sounds most inexcusable. I'm going to have to have a word with her next time we speak!" Roxy balled her hands up into fists, her knuckles turning white as she spoke. She seemed to have completely forgotten that she'd treated me the exact same way right before we rendezvoused with Miria.
I glanced down at my feet for a moment and noticed a curious gray arm on the ground, blood congealing on the stump.
"Is this a goblin arm?" I asked.
"But it's gray. Goblins are green, so it can't possibly belong to a goblin," Miria said, her chest puffed up with pride.
She was right about the color, that much was sure, but the musculature of the arm itself was identical to that of a goblin. Miria and I bickered for a while until Roxy got tired of listening to us and announced we would take it back as well.
"We'll ask Laine to analyze that too. Fay, do you mind keeping a hold of it?"
"Yeah, okay." It was kind of disgusting, but it was possibly also important. We couldn't just leave it there. I picked up the gray arm and placed it in the sack I'd brought with me. The colorless flesh felt slimy to the touch.
"It's getting dark. Let's head back," said Roxy.
She was right. Our main goal had been to investigate what was going on, and at least now we had evidence to study and observations to consider. The number of goblins was far beyond the usual, and it brought to mind the hordes of rampaging orcs I'd encountered in Galia. Furthermore, there was that strange magical seal and the gray arm. Once we delivered the information to Laine, that would be mission accomplished.

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Once we arrived at the western gate, I parted ways with Roxy and Miria.
“Thanks for your help today, Fate. We’ll see you again tomorrow,” Roxy said.
“Got it.”
“Bye-bye!”
“See you tomorrow,” Miria muttered as she walked away.
Roxy and Miria headed to the Military District to deliver their report to Laine while I went to the Residential District, where I planned to meet Sahara at the orphanage. I had a feeling she’d still be there, helping the nuns with their work. Whenever I went to pick her up, I always found her conked out on a chapel bench.
As I expected, I found her fast asleep, kneeling at a pew as if in prayer. I said a quick word to the nuns, then put Sahara on my back and headed home. It warmed my heart to see her sleeping so peacefully.
Aaron and Memil had finished their work and were back at the manor when I returned.
“Welcome back, Fate. How did things go with the goblins?” asked Aaron.
“As we expected, there was something different about them. We gathered some clues, though, so we passed them on to Laine for analysis.”
“I see. I hope it’s nothing, but I’ve heard some rumors at the castle that monsters have been markedly more active in a number of different regions recently.”
Did he mean those regions were experiencing something similar to what we had discovered in the forest? It made me worried about the people at the Barbatos and Hart estates, but Aaron put a reassuring hand on my shoulder.
“You won’t get anywhere worrying about what’s outside of your control, Fate. As the head of the family, your concerns and fears will trickle down to those around you. Don’t forget.”
“I won’t.”
Aaron then took Sahara from my back and took her to her room, leaving Memil and me alone.
Memil smiled before I could speak. “Welcome home, my lord,” she said. “Dinner is already prepared. Would you like to eat together with Lord Aaron once he’s finished putting Sahara to bed?”
“Yes, please.”
“Very well.” Memil bowed politely before leaving for the kitchen. She was from an esteemed family, so it was no surprise that there was a certain elegance to her movements. Memil was the only maid in the entire kingdom who had once been a holy knight.
After dinner, I soaked in the bath, then retired to my room to sleep. Just as I was beginning to doze off, I heard a careful knock at my door.

“May I come in?” It was Memil.
“Okay,” I said, and she entered. Even though it was late, she was still dressed in her uniform. She probably had extra work to do because Sahara had fallen asleep earlier than usual. We would have to start thinking about hiring more servants soon.
Memil sat down on my bed and gazed out the window at the moon. “It’s a full moon…”
“Yeah, it is.”
A cheeky grin grew on Memil’s face, her sharp fangs glinting in the moonlight. They were the very reason Memil had joined the Barbatos family.

Chapter 5:
Soul Swap

I AWOKE TO GLORIOUS GOLDEN beams of sunlight streaming in through the open window. But this wasn't my room. From the bed, I studied my surroundings. The most striking thing about the room was the soothing light-blue wallpaper. Nearby was a selection of cute-looking furniture. When I shifted my gaze to the white bed I'd woken up in, I noticed a huge, plush black bear toy, just sitting there by my side.

What is this? Why am I even in this room?

I reached for Greed to ask his opinion, but he wasn't there. I was exhausted after seeing Memil, and I'd gone right to sleep. That much I remembered. Had I gone sleepwalking and ended up in a different bed in a different room? I couldn't understand it at all, and I let out a great sigh.

"Huh?! My voice…!"

It was a girl's voice, and one I knew very well. It was then that I looked down at my body. I was wearing a white sleeping gown with a beautiful frilly collar. And underneath, I saw the curving outline of breasts.

Have I turned into a girl?!

Whatever drowsiness had filled my head completely evaporated, and I spoke so I could listen to my voice one more time.

"No way… Ahhhhhh!"

There was no mistaking it. I shot out of bed to the room's full-length mirror to make sure I was who I suspected. My movements were clumsy—I wasn't used to this new set of legs! I almost fell on my face, but somehow managed to stumble to the mirror. *Why is this happening?!*

"I'm Roxy! I'm Roxy! Whaaaaaaat?!" I gripped the mirror with both hands and cried. "Huh?! What?! Ahhhhhhh!"

I paced aimlessly around the room, trying to calm my rapidly beating heart and failing miserably. Then I tripped on the carpet with a shriek and fell to my knees. What was going on? I couldn't help myself and started laughing.

Oh, it's a dream. It has to be.

I rolled around on the carpet, waiting. Five minutes passed, ten minutes passed, but I still didn't wake up.

"It's not a dream!" I cried. "What is this?! What do I do?!"

I rolled left and right along the carpet, and then I heard the door burst open. I turned to find myself face-to-face with…myself. I was looking at Fate Barbatos, still dressed in his pajamas, his hair an unruly mess, and his face a portrait of stress as he walked over to me. He grabbed both of my shoulders and straddled me as I lay on the carpet. I shrieked.

"Help! I'm being attacked by myself!"

"Calm down. That's you, isn't it, Fay?"

"Huh? Roxy…is that you?" I gaped. *Whoa, what?*

All my strength left my body. Then, our voices spoke as one, confirming our fears.
“We’ve swapped bodies!”
Roxy—in my body—stood up and reached a hand down toward me. “Stand up,” she said, “the floor’s no place for a nap.”
“Yeah, I know.” I took her hand and got to my feet.
Then the two of us sat side by side on Roxy’s bed. As we started to regain our composure, Roxy speculated on how this could’ve happened.
“I was me until I went to sleep last night. And when I woke up, I was you. Speaking of, you’re not much of a sound sleeper, are you? I literally fell out of bed.”
I laughed. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But, uh, setting aside my sleeping habits, the same thing happened with me.”
“Did it? Hm. I’ve been thinking it might be because we got caught in that magical seal while we investigated the Hobgoblin Forest yesterday.”
“Ah, right, we were both bathed in that strange red light just before it faded.”
Roxy leaned in closer to me. “That’s right! Perhaps it was the red light that caused us to swap bodies. And perhaps the only reason the swap didn’t happen immediately was because your attack interrupted the spell.”
“Hmm… So if the spell had worked right then, we would have swapped bodies instantaneously?”
We considered it, but Roxy shook her head decisively. “I don’t think so. Do you think that perhaps the real goal was for the goblins to swap bodies with us?”
“If that’s the case, we’re actually really lucky. If I had to swap bodies with anyone, I’m glad it was with you. I don’t even want to imagine swapping bodies with a goblin.”
“I’m glad too. I would have hated becoming a goblin.”
We laughed for a moment, but we still had a serious problem on our hands. We couldn’t stay trapped in each other’s bodies forever.
“Swapping bodies like this is a real bother. I didn’t even have a chance to mentally prepare myself…” Roxy murmured.
“That makes two of us,” I replied.
We sat there at the edge of the bed, dejected. However, there was still one girl who might be able to help us find an answer: Laine. She was likely still hard at work in her laboratory within the Military District. We’d given her all the clues we had and asked her to analyze them.
“There’s a chance that Laine has already discovered something about that magical seal and the gray arm we gave her,” I said. “Let’s go pay her a visit.”
“Indeed, let’s go. But first!” Roxy gripped my shoulders in her hands.
“Huh?! What?!”
“Come with me,” she said.

I followed her to her closet, where she opened it up and began taking out her holy knight equipment.
“Okay, that’s everything,” she said. “Now, close your eyes.”
“Close my eyes?”
“Of course! I don’t want you to see me naked! So you have to close your eyes!”
There was no use arguing, so I let her blindfold me with a piece of fabric and did as I was told. I lifted both of my arms and felt my sleeping gown get taken off and replaced with Roxy’s holy knight uniform. It was a whole lot of raising arms and raising legs to put it all on, and when Roxy accidentally touched me, I let out a surprised yelp.
“Fay, please try not to make such weird sounds with my body,” Roxy said.
“I can’t help it. This body is different. It’s more sensitive.”
“Fay! Please don’t talk about my body like that!”
It was probably because winter still clung to the streets that Roxy’s—that was to say, *my*—hands were cold. I hadn’t known my hands got so cold, and I shrieked a few more times before we were finally done. Finally, Roxy took off my makeshift blindfold.
“Wow,” I said. “I’m kind of exhausted.”
“Don’t be like that. We have to head straight to Laine after this! And we’re still not finished. Come here, please.”
Roxy made me sit in front of her makeup stand, where she used a comb to brush my long, beautiful, golden locks. It felt amazing.
“Wow, you’re really good at that,” I said.
“Because I do it all the time. It’s not easy being a woman.”
I nodded. “It really isn’t.”
“Okay, we’re done!” said Roxy, pulling me before the full-length mirror.
Yeah, I look good, I thought. Bringing my thumb and index finger to my chin, I struck a dashing pose. I looked chic. I looked cool. But Roxy, who was watching by my side, told me to knock it off.
“Okay, I guess now we’ll go back to your manor, Fay, and then… I’ll…get…changed.”
“Yeah…let’s…do that.”
Just as we were getting up to leave, we noticed Lady Aisha peeking in through a crack in the doorway. Her mouth hung open wordlessly as the color drained from her face. She entered the room silently before finally speaking.
“Roxy. Fate. I don’t really want to have to tell you this, but I’ve been watching you for a little while now, and I think…it would be best if you stopped doing…whatever it is you are doing. There’s an order to things, you know. Bursting into each other’s rooms, holding one another on the floor, playing dress-up games involving blindfolds… I have to say, I never, ever imagined my own daughter would be interested in such things. I’m shocked!”
“Mother, that’s not it at all!”

Roxy jumped toward Lady Aisha in an attempt to explain, but it had entirely the wrong effect. Lady Aisha was taken completely off guard by the sight of my body walking toward her.

“Come now, Fate, get a hold of yourself,” she said, her voice rising in pitch until she was yelling. “Take your hands off me this instant! What’s gotten into you?! Is Roxy not enough for you? Now you’re after me?! I’m sorry, Fate, but I—just what are you trying to do to me?!”

This is bad! This is terrible! She has no idea what’s going on! She’s never going to trust me again! I wailed internally.

I leaped between the two of them, hoping to explain. First, I told her about waking that morning in the wrong body, then described the events in the Hobgoblin Forest and the possibility that these things were related. I kept at it stubbornly until Lady Aisha finally grasped what had happened to the two of us.

“Ah, I see. You gave me quite the shock! I thought it was going to be a case of Fate assaulting both mother and daughter! You had my heart fluttering quite a bit, even at my age,” Lady Aisha said with a teasing grin.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I suddenly found myself in the grip of Lady Aisha’s arms. Didn’t she know it was me inside of her daughter’s body?

“Please stop, my lady,” I said.

“What’s wrong with a little motherly love? We’re mother and daughter after all—on a physical level, that is. And the more you resist, the more I don’t want to stop!”

“Save me! She touched my butt!” I shrieked.

Lady Aisha had crossed a line, and it infuriated Roxy. Her mother couldn’t help but enjoy watching me squirm, even when we were in the middle of a serious emergency. Roxy once again leaped toward Lady Aisha, this time pinning her to Roxy’s bed.

“Mother, please! Stop it with all the jokes and the teasing!”

“Fate, stop! My heart still pines for my husband.”

“Mother,” Roxy groaned. “*I’m* Fate now! It’s me, Roxy!”

“My lady, let’s save the playing for later, I’m begging you.”

Roxy kept her mother pinned to the bed in anger and frustration. I looked on in shock, unsure of what to do.

Then I felt another gaze at the open door, likely drawn to all the commotion. It was Haru, the head servant, and her glasses fogged up as she peeked at us from the doorway. Roxy and Lady Aisha seemed to realize it, too, and they turned their eyes slowly toward her. Haru’s face blanched, and she bowed over and over nervously.

“I’m so sorry. I won’t tell a soul, I promise. I had no idea you were all engaged in this sort of *relationship*. I’ll never tell anyone! Never. Please, allow me to excuse myself!”

Haru turned tail and vanished down the hall. Lady Aisha left, too, her expression that of a woman who knew she’d taken her joke a step too far. The three of us burst from the room in pursuit of the retreating Haru.

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Once we cornered Haru, we were able to explain the situation, and we finally headed for Barbatos Manor. When we arrived, I waited in the main hall while Roxy dressed herself. I didn’t intend to play any blindfold dress-up games again, not after what we had just gone through. Conversely, Lady Aisha offered to help Roxy get herself together, but Roxy vehemently opposed the idea.

I couldn’t help but share in Roxy’s anxiety; something about leaving my body in Lady Aisha’s care struck me as exceedingly hazardous. Lady Aisha even proposed that, if I didn’t get back to my body by the end of the day, we should take a bath together. I hoped more than anything that she was just kidding.

Once she finished changing, Roxy came down the stairs with Aaron, Memil, and Sahara by her side. They’d caught her as soon as they realized someone different was inside of my body. Aaron laughed when he saw me trapped in Roxy’s.

“Ah, Fate. Looks like you’ve got yourself wrapped up in yet another bizarre circumstance,” he said.

“Well, who would have guessed I’d end up in Roxy’s body?”
“I don’t think it’s a good idea to let anyone outside of those gathered here—and those employed at the manors—know about this. You have your positions as holy knights to think of. In fact, let’s keep this between those who already know. And if you’re heading to the Military District, don’t forget: You’re Roxy Hart now.”
“I’ll be careful,” I promised.
Aaron’s advice made it clear how worried he was for both of us, so I knew I had to do my best to follow it. However, I could tell I was talking too much like a young man, so if I wanted to pass as Roxy, I had to stop opening my mouth so wide.
Then I noticed Sahara approaching me with a worried look on her face. “My lord…”
“I’ll be fine, Sahara! I’ll be back to normal in no time. But I’ll be counting on you to look after the manor while I’m gone, okay?”
“Okay. Leave it to me!”
I smiled at Sahara to reassure her worried heart and ruffled her hair a little. Meanwhile, Memil was discussing something with Roxy before she turned to me, delivered a polite bow, and strode toward the kitchen.
“We should get going,” I said.
Aaron and Sahara saw us off, and we walked toward Laine’s laboratory in the Military District. I asked Roxy what she and Memil had spoken about, and she smiled.
“She’s worried about you, Fate. She asked me to look after you.”
“Memil said that? Really?”
I always felt like she maintained her cold, aloof attitude in order to create distance between us, but perhaps we were closer in our hearts than I realized—never mind the fact that I was irreplaceable to her because of what happened to her on full moon nights. I was a little worried about it all, but hearing Memil’s words made me happy.
After a short while, we reached the gate to the Military District. Only holy knights were permitted entry, so fortunately the gate was rarely frequented. The gatekeepers saw us approaching from a distance and began opening the gates as we neared. Because Roxy and I were both from the five esteemed families, the guards recognized us on sight.
I thought back to Aaron’s advice, and I knew I had to be careful not to ruin Roxy’s reputation. As I passed through the gates, I looked at each guard to give them a bright smile and a greeting, just like Roxy always did. With those two actions, the guards seemed to melt before my eyes.
What power is this? I thought. I guess I should expect nothing less from the goddess of Seifort.
I still felt something was a little off, so I turned to look at Roxy behind me. She strode through the gate in her usual manner, giving the guards a bright smile and a wave.
“Hello, everyone! Thank you all so much for your fine work!”

The guards were immediately suspicious of the new and improved Fate, who walked with such a feminine gait that his toes pointed inward. They muttered polite replies.
“Roxy,” I hissed. “This is bad!”
“What is?”
“You’re being *you*! You’re being you in *my* body!”
“Oh. Oh, my. Now that you mention it, I am, aren’t I? I’m Fate Barbatos now.”
She straightened up and did her best Fate impression. It was awkward in parts, but it got the job done. However, Roxy must have thought she’d nailed it, because she turned to me with a smug look on her face.
“How about it? I’m good, aren’t I? It’s because I’m always keeping my eyes on you, so I know just how you walk.”
“I think you’re laying it on a bit thick with the swagger, honestly.”
“No, this is exactly how you walk, Fate.”
I groaned and made a mental note to be more aware of my gait from now on.
Then Roxy gave me a cheeky grin. “Just kidding.”
She fooled me again!
But instead of annoying me, her joke helped me relax. Sure, we’d swapped bodies, but it wasn’t as mortifying as I would’ve guessed. In some ways, because I swapped with Roxy specifically, I didn’t have to be too worried.
We walked on, imitating one another, as Laine’s laboratory appeared in the distance. I prayed she would have good news for us. If I stayed in Roxy’s body much longer, there was every chance I would end up in a bath with Lady Aisha later that night. There was no telling what would happen if that were to occur.

Chapter 6:
Laine's Laboratory

THE RESEARCH FACILITY was twenty stories tall, and you couldn’t help but stare up at the looming edifice. The skills necessary to build architecture of this magnitude weren’t endemic to the kingdom itself. Buildings like the one Laine worked in were modeled on the deserted structures at the heart of Galia.

I’d only seen Galian buildings from a distance, but I knew some of them reached as high as one to two hundred stories. The buildings in the Military District couldn’t reach those heights because we still hadn’t mastered the Galian technology needed to build that high.

Roxy and I said a quick greeting to the guards at the facility entrance and went inside. The interior was lit up by a light that didn’t come from traditional lamps. According to Laine, the Military District was powered by magical power generators that allowed electricity to flow through and be used in its buildings.

“It’s a special metal known as a flament,” Roxy said, pointing to the light coming from the ceiling. “It lights up when electricity passes through it. If we could apply it outside of the Military District and make use of it in the greater kingdom, it would make life much, much easier for our citizens.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ve heard people call this field of study ‘magitech.’ If we can use it to master old Galian technology, we can build a world where people don’t have to rely on the skills they were born with.”

“What a wonderful idea! The sooner we create such a place, the better.”

Roxy chattered excitedly about all the possibilities, and I ended up telling her about the work I was doing with Eris and Aaron. I’d originally wanted to keep it a secret and reveal it to her when we were finished, but I realized now that it didn’t matter. She’d still be surprised to see it even if she knew beforehand.

“Actually,” I said, “we’re using Hausen as a test bed for applying the technology of the Military District to a family estate.”

“Really?!”

Roxy couldn’t believe it. That was only natural, though. Until now, the research in the Military District had been kept strictly confidential, and ordinary citizens and townsfolk were forbidden from having any contact with it. But with the return of Eris, things were changing.

“Eris selected Hausen as a model for the first magitech city. We’re actually in the middle of constructing our own magical power generator.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I said bashfully. “I wanted you to see it once it was nearer to completion.”

“It’s your first step toward a city and a home that doesn’t rely on skill hierarchy. I can’t wait to see it!”

We passed through the white halls and entered a strange contraption called an elevator, which would bring us to the higher floors. Laine’s laboratory was at the top of the facility, on the twentieth floor. Roxy pushed the button for Laine’s floor, and the doors of the elevator slid closed of their own accord.

“It never ceases to amaze me, the way it moves by its own power,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m not used to it either. But pushing a button and being taken where you want to go? It sure beats taking the stairs.”

“Certainly much easier on the legs.”

We talked about Hausen as the elevator took us up and finally stopped. A panel indicated that we reached the twentieth floor. Before we could even step out of the elevator, a girl with light chestnut-colored hair leaped toward me. As soon as I saw her, I dodged behind Roxy. The girl passed straight through the space I once occupied and slammed head-first into the elevator wall with a crash.

“Ow, that really hurt! Why are you avoiding me, Lady Roxy?! There’s no need to hide behind Fate!”

“I, uh…I’m scared,” I said.

“What?! But I do this all the time, and you always let me! You give me a good morning kiss!”

Roxy’s—er, my—face reddened until it practically glowed. “No, I don’t, Miria! Don’t tell such lies!”

Miria’s eyes darted between Roxy and me as lines of concern drew across her brow. “I can’t explain it, but…I’m getting a real weird feeling from this. I’m talking to Roxy and then Fate answers? Plus, you’re both talking strangely. Fate’s talking like Roxy and Roxy’s talking like Fate… Am I going crazy?”

“What do you mean, ‘strange’? We always talk like this,” I said, maintaining a straight face.

“What are you talking about, Fate—I mean, Roxy?” Miria threw her hands up in the air. “I really am going crazy!”

Miria’s brain went into overdrive as she tried and failed to grasp what was happening. I could almost see the steam rising from her head.

We couldn’t bear to watch her confusion any longer, so we stepped out of the elevator and explained what we could about our strange body-swap experience. It was the third time we’d done it, and we were improving every time. Miria was still a little perplexed, but she at least accepted the information without too much fuss. She was surprisingly flexible.

“I see,” she said. “Well, at least it all makes sense now. So, Lady Roxy, you’re stuck in Fate’s body; and Fate, you’re stuck in Lady Roxy’s body, and—oh my god, I’m so extremely jealous! I want to change bodies with Lady Roxy! Oh, imagine all the things I could do if that happened!”

Miria let out a mischievous giggle. I couldn't believe she said that right in front of us. Roxy went pale as she listened, and her eyes glistened with new tears.
"I'm so glad it was you, Fate," she said, putting a hand to her chest and breathing a sigh of relief. "If I swapped bodies with Miria, who knows what would have happened…"
I put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a knowing, sympathetic nod.
Miria explained that she was waiting at Laine's laboratory because she knew Roxy was coming about the Hobgoblin Forest. She had arrived at the lab two hours ago, which was kind of impressive in its own way. But it was also obvious that she had been a real handful for the laboratory researchers.
"Waiting here for a whole two hours?" I asked. "You're as reckless and free-flying as always, huh, Miria?"
"Could you please not say that kind of thing to me while you're wearing Lady Roxy's face? If the real Roxy knew I'd been waiting here so long, she'd be all like, 'Oh, Miria, I'm so happy to see you!'"
"I would say no such thing!" said Roxy.
Things were always a bit rowdy with the three of us, but it was on another level in our current situation.
"Ohh! What am I supposed to do now?!" wailed Miria.
"Huh? What? What are you talking about?"
"I can't hug Lady Roxy when she's like this! I'd simply be hugging *you* inside of Roxy's body! But Lady Roxy is trapped in your body, and I… What am I supposed to do?!"
"I don't know!" I cried.
"I don't know either!" echoed Roxy.
Miria dropped to her knees, tears ready to burst from her eyes. She clenched her fist and slammed it into the floor.
A passing researcher gave us a weird look before moving on. We had to be careful; if we were too much of a nuisance, we might lose our clearance to visit the facility. I didn't exactly want to, but I knew I had to try and patch things up before they got any worse. I cleared my head, focused only on my recollections of Roxy, and put on the most winsome smile I could.
"Come now, Miria," I said. "Nothing good will come of just sitting on the floor feeling frustrated. You'll only get in the way of all these busy researchers."
"Lady Roxy!" Miria cried.
Her eyes had practically turned into hearts. My Roxy impression was good! Or so I thought until Miria paused, motionless.
"I…I won't be fooled that easily… I know it's you in there, Fate."
"What are you talking about? It's me, Roxy! Now come here so I can give you a hug!"

Miria groaned and stepped toward my open arms as though she were being sucked in. “I know it’s not really you!” she sobbed. “I know it, but…my body…I can’t control it!”
I did my best Roxy giggle. “Come now, Miria! Quickly!”
“Okay!”
Just as Miria was about to leap into my arms, Roxy (as me) stepped between us. Her eyes had narrowed to slits, and there was more than a little anger in them. “What in the world are the two of you doing?! We’re in the middle of an emergency!”
“Sorry…” Miria and I said in unison.
I’d let myself get carried away. Miria was always trying to avoid me, and it was interesting to see her suddenly so friendly toward me.
For her part, the disheartened Miria looked at Roxy with a pleading look. “I get all my energy and enthusiasm from your hugs, Lady Roxy. What should I do?”
“Well, I can still give you hugs…as long as you’re okay with me looking like this.”
Miria crept toward Roxy-as-me and got her energy refill as she muttered uncomfortably. “It’s Lady Roxy on the inside, it’s Lady Roxy on the inside…gah…”
Did she really dislike me *that* much? I couldn’t help but feel a little hurt as I watched.
“It’s Fate’s rough, coarse body on the outside, but at least it’s Roxy’s nourishing, all-encompassing energy on the inside. Okay! I’m raring to go! Let’s enter Laine’s laboratory!”
She wasn’t even trying to be nice about it.
It’s rough and coarse because I’m a young man going through Aaron’s training regime! I thought. So I put on a bit of muscle! Give me a break!
Nonetheless, at least Miria’s spirits had brightened. She led the way to Laine’s laboratory with a visible spring in her step. The laboratory was at the end of the corridor on the left after leaving the elevator. I’d been here so often that it almost felt like going back to my own room. Laine wasn’t the shy type, though. It didn’t matter how long I lingered; she just went right on with her research regardless.
I knew it would be the same as always when we entered: Laine would be silently hard at work, and she’d probably have skipped breakfast. We’d expected that much and so had brought along a light meal from the manor. I was certain that Laine would become aware of her hunger the moment she saw it and bound over like a ravenous little woodland creature. I did all this at Mugan’s behest.
“Please, I’m begging you,” he’d said. “When you have some time, will you at least feed my daughter?”
What surprised me was that he specifically told me to feed her, not to simply bring her food. Then again, feeding her seemed to be the only way to

get her away from her research long enough to notice me, so there was a certain logic to Mugan's request.
The door to Laine's laboratory opened automatically when we approached it. The lab behind it was a complete and utter mess. Books with cracked spines, scientific instruments, and reams of paper covered in writing were scattered about on every surface. Laine was not the type to bother cleaning up after herself, so her laboratory was the complete opposite of Roxy's perfectly neat and tidy room.
"It's as if this room is a bigger mess every time I visit," I said.
"What?! But we tidied it just yesterday," Roxy moaned. "How did it get this messy so quickly?"
"It's like all the work we did was for nothing."
Past all the books, papers, tools, and research apparatuses, Laine stared intently at a panel set in the console she was working on. Her eyes were ringed with dark circles from lack of sleep. When she noticed us entering her laboratory, she glanced at us and stifled a yawn.
"Ah, good morning! I've been expecting you."
"Morning!" said Roxy.
"Good morning," I said.
"We don't have time for casual morning greetings!" cried Miria. "Laine, you have to hear this! Let me explain—"
Miria excitedly regaled Laine with the story of what had happened to Roxy and me.
"No need to tell me," said Laine. "I already know."
"Huh?!"
Miria's shock left her in stunned silence. Laine walked past her to me and Roxy, scrutinizing us with the one eye that wasn't hidden behind her bangs.
"You've swapped souls," she said. "Just as I expected. So, how do you feel? Have you noticed any changes in your bodies?"
Roxy and I shook our heads in unison. Laine shuffled back to her console and typed something. "I see…" she said.
"What?" I asked.
"Your souls have only just swapped, so you haven't felt any of the predicted effects. Oh," she said suddenly. "Is that basket for me?"
Laine snatched the basket out of my hands and stuffed her face with the sandwiches inside. Watching her eat gave me the distinct impression of a hungry little squirrel filling its cheeks with chestnuts. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about how much she resembled an adorable fluffy animal, though—not after what she'd said.
Effects we hadn't felt yet?
Laine polished off another sandwich before speaking again. "Your souls are in the wrong vessels, which is dangerous. If you stay like this for too long, then…well, worst-case scenario, your bodies grow weaker until you die."
Roxy and I cried out in dismay. That was fair—we'd just learned that our lives were at stake. We'd thought swapping bodies was bad enough, but

that was only the beginning of our troubles. Roxy and I stood there, our eyes wide with fright as Laine laughed.

“That’s why I pulled an all-nighter! I’ve been concocting a plan. Don’t worry; I have more to tell you, so sit down and let’s get to it.”

We busied ourselves cleaning up the detritus around Laine’s laboratory and made enough space to sit and talk.

Chapter 7:
Ancient Monsters

LAINE GOBBLED DOWN THE SANDWICHES we'd brought while Roxy and I sat quietly and waited for her to finish. She hadn't eaten since the day before. Seeing an opening, Miria tried reaching a tentative hand into the basket herself.

"Hey! Those sandwiches aren't for you!" Roxy snapped.

"But I skipped breakfast too! I skipped it to wait for you guys! Lady Roxy…" Miria pleaded. "Can I have a sandwich too?"

Although I was already used to it, this must have been the strangest sight to anyone else, as it now looked like Fate and Miria were close friends. I knew Roxy was inside my body, but anyone who didn't know would have been shocked. The scene was straight-up preposterous. Even Laine looked on as if she were observing an interaction between two rare specimens.

Roxy sighed. She always went easy on Miria when she begged, so I already knew what she was going to say. "Fine, fine… Laine, would you mind sharing your sandwiches with Miria?"

"I don't mind, so long as you're happy for me to do all the analysis I need after breakfast."

It was just like Laine to say something like that. Roxy had actually made the sandwiches, but once they were in Laine's possession, they belonged to her. She was rational and emotionless to a fault, and those traits made her a great researcher. Mind you, the fact that she felt no pangs of conscience in the pursuit of her research, no matter how far she pushed, caused me no end of grief.

Regardless, as soon as Miria had permission, she grabbed a sandwich and went to town on it. "Lady Roxy's homemade sandwiches! Yes!" she cried before taking a big bite with her small mouth. As soon as she did, tears streamed from her eyes like tiny waterfalls, and she cried out again.

"They're the best! Now I can die without regrets!"

"Why would you even say that?" I groaned.

"You eat Lady Roxy's homemade food all the time, so someone like you couldn't possibly understand my feelings. You don't deserve such happiness! I should be in your position, not you!" Miria glared at me furiously as she gobbled down her sandwich.

No matter how confused she had been at first, she had completely adjusted to our new situation. Well, almost. Because I was in Roxy's body, Miria sometimes brushed against me without thinking and flushed with embarrassment.

"This is ridiculous," she said. "You look like Lady Roxy, but if I hug you, I'm actually hugging Fate. But if I hug the real Lady Roxy, then from the

outside, it looks like I'm hugging you. What's the best hugging protocol for a situation like this?"
The seriousness of Miria's face made it seem like she faced a quandary of vital importance. She looked to me and Roxy for answers.
"How are we supposed to know?!" I shouted.
"For the time being, please stop hugging me," said Roxy.
"You guys are so rowdy," said Laine, watching us as she devoured the last sandwich. "It's been a while since I had such a chatty breakfast. In any case, shall we get on with things?"
Laine wiped the crumbs from her mouth with her handkerchief and guided us to a separate room. It was a familiar one, being the location where Laine ran all her tests and examinations. Greed and I visited it regularly.
Hm? Actually, where is Greed, anyway? I thought.
I put my hand to the sword hanging at my belt, but there was no response. Then I remembered. I was Roxy now, so I had Roxy's holy sword. That meant Roxy had Greed. I had been so caught up in being in a new body that I'd completely forgotten about my annoying black sword. I wanted to hear his take on the situation, so I called out to Roxy.
"Roxy, can I have my sword for a minute? I want to ask Greed something."
"Oh, right. Yes," she said, "we should get his opinion about all of this too. I completely forgot that I was wearing him. Here."
I took the black sword from Roxy with thanks and engaged my Telepathy skill, but… "It's not working!"
Roxy and I looked at each other in surprise, but Laine tittered.
"Of course not. Your souls swapped bodies. Here's the interesting part: Skills aren't connected to a person's soul; they actually reside inside the body. That means that you don't have the Telepathy skill, Fate. Roxy does. That said, I'm not sure if she can use it yet. Your souls are probably still unused to their new hosts."
"Still, it's worth a shot," said Roxy. "Fay, will you pass me Greed?"
"Sure."
I passed the sword back to Roxy and waited to see if she'd have any luck using the Telepathy skill.
It seemed like there was no response at first, and a confused frown crossed Roxy's face. However, after a few more tries, her eyes lit up in surprise.
"I can hear him! I can hear Greed's voice! It's lower than I expected—and huskier."
"He's also got a rotten attitude, so be careful," I added.
I tried to warn her, but Roxy only laughed in surprise and said that Greed was a most gentlemanly blade. That couldn't be right. Greed was arrogant and, on top of that, greedy enough to live up to his name.
"I don't believe it…" I muttered.
"Don't say such things, Fay. Greed is your partner."
"I'm just not convinced. But whatever. What's he saying?"

“Let’s see…” Roxy turned to the sword, nodding as she listened. Then her face went red.
Uh-oh. What are they talking about? I stiffened. “Roxy, what’s wrong?”
“Er…” Roxy was hesitant to say exactly what she had been told, but essentially, Greed had told her to keep an eye on me to make sure I didn’t do anything too “risqué” with Roxy’s body.
Damn you, Greed! What the hell are you telling her?! I would never do anything too risqué—not like that!
“I’m really disappointed in him,” I said. “Why would he say something so harsh?”
“Fay, why did your eyes look so shifty just now?”
“Oh, they were shifty all right, Lady Roxy!” said Miria. “He’s a boy, after all. We’ll have to have someone on guard duty with him tonight to make sure he doesn’t do anything untoward with your precious body!”
Their level of trust in me was in free fall. I just wanted everyone to remember what had happened just that morning when I woke up. Had I had any dirty thoughts then? No! I’d been worried about the body swapping and *only* the body swapping! Sure, now that things had calmed down, I had a few…idle thoughts, but I was a young man! Every young man at my age had…thoughts!
Roxy’s gaze pierced into me as she spoke. “I believe in Fay,” she said. “I believe that my body is in safe hands!”
“What?!” Miria cried. “Really?! But—”
“It’s in safe hands, Miria!”
Miria desperately tried to convince Roxy otherwise, but Roxy refused to change her mind. She had worries, and it showed, but in the end, she put her faith in me. In any case, our lives hung in the balance; this wasn’t the time for impure thoughts.
“Thanks, Roxy,” I said.
“It’s fine. We went through so much together in Galia. Compared to that, this is almost nothing.”
Someone cleared their throat nearby, and we turned to find Laine looking rather annoyed. “Can you get into that stuff afterward, please?” she asked. “Certainly you must appreciate that, at this rate, things will only get worse.”
“Sorry!” we replied.
It was always too easy for me to just get lost in conversation with Roxy. Even when I knew better, it still happened. We had too much *fun*. But we both knew it was becoming something of a problem.
Meanwhile, Miria decided to chip in with her own opinion. “Yeah, Laine is right! She’s trying to tell you guys something really important right now! Listen carefully!”
Roxy and I were so shocked that we said the same thing at the same time: “You’re one to talk!”

Miria had given us the biggest runaround in the first place. Roxy knocked her right off her proverbial high horse. I'd never seen her scold Miria like that. It was very cool, and she managed to look so valiant doing it.

I soon realized that if Mugan had been there, he would have stopped this from happening before it even began. However, Mugan was away with Eris, investigating the mountain city where Rafale's remaining hideout had been located. Only now that he was gone did I realize how tough Miria was to handle.

Laine seemed to understand too, because she took Miria by the collar and dragged her from the room.

"What? Why are you taking me outside? Miss Laine, wait a minute. Miss Lai—"

Laine slammed the door and swiftly locked it behind her. Realizing she'd been locked out, Miria stood with her nose pressed against the thick glass window, staring in as tears streamed down her face. Laine ignored her completely as she returned to Roxy and me.

"Well, that takes care of that," she said. "Now we can finally talk. Whenever Miria is here, the subject keeps changing and we can't stay on track."

"Ah… Yeah, that sounds about right," I said.

"Indeed," added Roxy.

Not one of us mentioned that it was kind of sad to have to lock Miria out. On this occasion, we were all in agreement that we had no other choice. I glanced at Miria. She stood by the window, looking at us like a helpless, abandoned kitten left out in the rain. I told myself to ignore her. It was a small price to pay for some peace and quiet.

Laine walked past the locked door to a section of the room filled with a variety of machinery and materials. After a little while, she returned with a trolley carrying a glass jar filled with green liquid. Inside, we saw the gray arm.

"That's the arm from yesterday, yeah?" I asked.

"It is. It's a very important sample, so I went to great pains to halt its decay. What do you think? It's wonderful, isn't it?"

By the look of her crooked smile, it was clear that Laine expected approval. She pushed her cheek against the glass canister as the arm floated within it. There was a distant look in Roxy's eyes as her face twitched. I probably wore the same expression.

"Uh, but more importantly, did you find out what monster the arm actually belongs to?" I asked.

"Of course I did! You're going to be so surprised!" Laine turned back to the gray arm with a longing gaze.

She continued to stare at it until Roxy and I shouted at her. "Well, what is it?!"

"Okay, okay, indoor voices please." Laine placed the canister on a desk. "According to my analysis, it belongs to an ancient monster that went extinct more than four thousand years ago. I checked the specimen against

all known existing monsters, but I couldn’t find anything similar. So, I extended the search further to include fossils recovered from Galia and… bingo!”
“An ancient, extinct monster…?”
An image of the great canyon of Galia flashed through my mind. It was the only place in the barren wastelands of Galia that remained a fertile oasis of plant life. Additionally, it was home to a host of fossilized monsters, all of them quietly left to their eternal slumber beneath the canyon’s surface. According to Greed, the monsters of the current era couldn’t even hold a candle to the ancient monsters in terms of strength and ferocity.
“But why would an ancient monster suddenly appear in the Hobgoblin Forest?”
“That I don’t know,” said Laine. “However, it seems the arm belongs to a monster called a goblin shaman. That’s what we’ve gathered from ancient monster data extracted from Galian relics. I never imagined that data would come in handy at a time like this.”
Laine turned to a piece of machinery and began fiddling with it. A few moments later, the monitor in front of us came to life with the image of a gray monster. It wore some kind of decorative headpiece made from what looked like roc feathers, and it held a large staff in its hands. It was taller than a regular goblin, but not quite as big as a hobgoblin. The most surprising trait of the monster was its eyes. Regular goblins only had two eyes, but the goblin shaman had four.
“Talk about a creepy goblin…” I muttered.
Roxy nodded in agreement. “Yes…it’s very much unlike the usual sort.”
From what we could tell, the horrifying monster on the monitor had cast the soul-swap spell on us. According to Laine, it wasn’t unlikely that ancient monsters had access to hidden skills and spells that were otherwise long lost to the monsters of the modern world.
“Most intriguing, wouldn’t you say? I’d love to get my hands on a sample of the whole thing, not just the arm.”
“Before we get distracted with that, how do we reverse the effects of the soul-swap spell?” I asked.
“It’s very simple. The magical seal you showed me was similar to spells that are still in use today. Though it must be said, none of them are so strange as to allow for soul swapping.” Then Laine added with a smile, “In any case, you just have to kill the goblin shaman.”
“That’s it?”
“Indeed. This particular seal is a sort of hex. The caster uses their magic to maintain the spell. That means that even now, that shaman is out there somewhere, still concentrating on this spell.”
I could just picture the goblin shaman somewhere in the darkness of the Hobgoblin Forest, seething at its lost arm while it went on muttering its curse.

Now that we knew how to break the spell, I wanted to get moving straight away. We could think about why ancient monsters were reappearing after we'd returned safely to our own bodies.
"Roxy, we have to get to the Hobgoblin Forest—Roxy?!"
She hadn't registered that I was speaking to her. Something was wrong. Sweat had begun to bead on her forehead.
"Fay…"
It took everything Roxy had just to utter my name before she collapsed where she stood.
I rushed to catch her, but she had already fallen unconscious. Laine's face turned suddenly serious as she studied Roxy's condition and laid her on the machine that she always used to run her analyses on me.
No more than ten minutes passed, but my thoughts were in such disarray that I couldn't track the passage of time at all. Usually, I would have turned to Greed for advice in a situation like this, but that was impossible while I was still in Roxy's body.
"Something is happening to her soul, Fate… Something you know very well."
"You don't mean…"
"The Gluttony skill is transitioning into its starved state. The shock of such a transformation must have been too much for Roxy to handle, so she fell unconscious."
I was left utterly stunned by the results of Laine's analysis. Laine's expert opinion was that I had developed a certain level of tolerance for the effects of Gluttony because I had been born with the skill. I also had Luna with me now, helping me by making some sort of defensive barrier around my soul. Thanks to her, the pangs of Gluttony's hunger were weaker. Those two factors had helped me maintain my sanity until now. But Roxy didn't have any of that.
When I considered Gluttony's current state, I realized that Roxy was enduring a hunger above and beyond what I had experienced when I devoured the Divine Dragon in Galia. Just thinking about it made my hair stand on end.
Laine hadn't predicted that it would be this dire, either. "I'll look after her, but you should do your best to kill that goblin shaman before her symptoms get any worse. According to my calculations, her soul won't be able to handle this for too long."
But I had a better idea. I knew someone who could help.
"No," I said. "I'm going to take Roxy back to Barbatos Manor. *She* can take care of her."
"Huh?!" Laine said, shocked. "Who do you mean?"
"Sorry, there's no time to explain!"
"Fate, wait!"

But I didn’t answer. I simply hefted Roxy onto my shoulder and opened the door. Outside, Miria was waiting, worried, and this time, she was silent. At least she knew how to read the room when the situation called for it.
I had to hurry. Memil would be at the manor. Only she could help Roxy now.

Chapter 8:
Miria's Past

I HAD TO LESSEN THE SHOCK OF THE GLUTTONY running rampant through Roxy's soul, and there wasn't a moment to lose. With Roxy on my shoulder, I leaped out of the laboratory window. It was quite the drop, but for Roxy's holy knight body, it wasn't a problem, especially now that I was used to it. Roxy looked slim, but her body was more agile and powerful than I had imagined—clearly the result of daily training and stat building.

Without warning, Miria poked her head out from the broken window and did something unbelievable.

"I'm coming too!" she shouted and leapt from the window with a cry.

"Miria! Don't be so reckless!"

She followed me, and as usual, she threw all caution to the wind. At first, I thought she'd done it without thinking, but I soon realized that it was her worry for Roxy that propelled her. Miria didn't care how tall the building was—where Roxy went, she followed. She felt the same as I did, which meant I had to bring her with me. Without consciously realizing it, I had begun to feel a sudden sympathy for Miria.

"Grab hold of my back!" I shouted. "You can come along, but don't blame me for whatever happens!"

"Roger!"

Because I had my hands full carrying Roxy, Miria hung from my back as we fell. She giggled mischievously as she hung tight.

"Roxy's body…it's so soft."

"Not the time, Miria!"

Miria rubbed her face into my back. Even at a time like this, she was the same as always. Granted, she did manage to lessen some of my stress, and for that I was grateful.

I turned my gaze to the building that stood alongside the laboratory. I knew Roxy and I could fall straight down and land safely from this height, but Miria didn't have the stats of a holy knight. If we kept on this course, the fall would hurt her, maybe badly.

"Why do you have to go and make everything difficult, Miria?!"

"I'm worried about Roxy too! I'm not going to just leave her!"

"Yeah, I know. But you better hang on tight!"

"Okay!"

I kicked hard against the wall of the laboratory, slowing the speed of our descent as I headed for the building next to us. Then I kicked off of that one in the same fashion, slowing our fall as we bounced between the two buildings. It was slower than dropping straight down, but it was fast enough.

All the same, I couldn’t help but think that if I’d known Miria was coming along, I could’ve just used the elevator.
“We’re about to land, Miria. Don’t let go!”
“Got it!”
“Wow, you’re not nearly as defiant and unruly as usual, huh?”
“At times like this, even I know how to behave myself.” Miria scowled.
Honestly, it surprised me that she realized how selfish she usually was.
As soon as we landed, I dashed toward the wall separating the Military District from the Holy Knight District and jumped straight over it. With Roxy’s holy knight strength, I could clear it in a single bound. It was, of course, more common to actually go through the gates, but I didn’t have the time to slow down. I felt almost weightless as we soared through the air.
“Do you think… Will Lady Roxy be all right?” Miria asked, worry clear in her voice.
“She’ll be back to normal soon,” I said. “But first we have to take her to the manor. Once we’ve done that, I can hunt down the goblin shaman.”
“I’m coming too! Roxy means everything to me, which means I want to help take down that monster!”
“I can’t take you with us this time, Miria,” I said.
I planned on asking Aaron for help dealing with this monster. His stats were in the Domain of E, making him easily one of the two strongest warriors in the entire kingdom. I also would have enlisted the help of Eris’s two white knights, but they’d pledged loyalty to Eris alone, which made them difficult to work with. On top of that, they were responsible for the daily tasks of running the kingdom in Eris’s absence, which made it hard to simply ask them for favors.
Compared to Aaron and the white knights, Miria wasn’t powerful enough. To fight an ancient monster, I needed people with strength at least on the level of a holy knight.
When I told Miria she’d have to wait at the manor with Roxy, she gripped my shoulders tight.
“But I have to do *something* for her,” she said. “Lady Roxy was—she was the only one who ever tried to help me.”
Those words stabbed at my heart. I remembered how, when I had been on the very brink of death working under the domineering Rafale, Roxy had been the only person who ever tried to help me too. Even though I’d originally gone to Galia to save her, when I ended up losing control of my Gluttony skill, I had looked to her once more to rescue me.
I wasn’t proud of that. I’d made a big deal out of acting heroic and saying that I’d keep her safe, but in the end, I was the one who’d needed saving.
However, it seemed like Miria carried a different kind of debt of gratitude.
As we ran toward the manor, she told me her story.
“I told you once that I was an orphan like you. Do you remember?”
“I do,” I said.

“So, I was an orphan, but I happened to have a magic sword skill. Because of that, a lot happened to me before I could totally make sense of the world.”

Miria’s first memories were of the orphanage. She didn’t know why her parents had abandoned a child with such a valuable skill, and perhaps she never would. She thought it likely this was because she had been born to a poor family. Hiring an appraiser to identify a newborn’s skill wasn’t exactly cheap, after all. On the other hand, perhaps if she had remained oblivious to her skill, she could have been spared from what happened next.

Her troubles began when a merchant visited the orphanage. He said he would identify all the children’s skills for free as an act of charity. On that day, the only child with a noteworthy skill was Miria, with her inborn talent for enchanting swords.

The merchant’s eyes changed when he realized what he’d stumbled upon. He asked the nuns if he could adopt Miria. He could give her a brighter future, he said, free of constraints. On top of that, he offered to make a considerable donation to the orphanage. The nuns, who believed in the fundamental goodness of people, trusted him. They’d spent their lives looking after abandoned orphans, and they were themselves kind-hearted.

They reminded me of the nuns who had been so easily fooled by Rafale, when he had used the forsaken for his twisted experiments. Those nuns believed in salvation, so they looked for it wherever they could. It was simply who they were.

Furthermore, this kind of predation happened all too often in the slums. That was why, even though so many lives had been lost to Rafale’s experiments, nobody ever blamed the nuns who had given the forsaken to him. Miria also didn’t feel any remorse or anger toward the nuns who essentially sold her.

However, the merchant who adopted Miria had taken her to a holy knight’s estate. There, a magical collar was placed around her neck, one which shot searing pain all through her body if she ever disobeyed orders.

In this way, Miria spent the next five years as a slave. She was given a meager amount of food and was tasked with exterminating any monsters that entered the estate grounds. She was allowed no rest.

“Because of that,” Miria said, “I earned a lot of spheres, and my level went way up.”

She said these words casually and easily, but it was hard to believe that anyone would force a child into ceaseless battle with monsters. I didn’t think I would have been able to do the same thing at her age, and I only won my first battle because I’d had Greed with me. A strong skill didn’t guarantee a strong heart. Rather, a strong heart was forged and tempered in the fires of battle.

“I fought and I fought, and…eventually I wondered if it would ever end. I knew my level had grown, and that my stats had grown with it, so I decided to gamble with them.”

“No way…”
“Look, you can still see it.”
As I ran along the path toward Barbatos Manor, Miria poked her face forward so I could see it more clearly. I turned to her and noticed a thin scar running along her neck. To be precise, it was a burn scar.
“I put the flaming sword’s blade between my neck and the collar, and I burned through it. It was so hot that I thought I was going to die, but fortunately, the collar broke open before anything really bad could happen. Once I was free, I ran with everything I had to the Kingdom of Seifort.”
The young Miria had nowhere else to go, but she felt drawn to the majesty of the kingdom’s capital. She hoped that if she made it to a city of that size, then she’d find a way to make things work out for herself.
No way, I thought. Her thoughts, her feelings—they were just like mine when I came to Seifort. We couldn’t possibly be that similar…could we?
“Excuse me, are you listening? Hello?” Miria asked. “I’m trying to tell you a serious story here.”
“I’m listening,” I said. “I’m listening intently, in fact.”
“Really…?”
“Don’t be rude! I wouldn’t ignore you. I’m the head of the Barbatos family!”
“Kind of suspicious that you’re bringing the family name into this. You never do that.” Miria’s hands gripped my shoulders tight, then relaxed. “Well, whatever. Anyway, I came here to Seifort without a coin to my name. I wandered the slums in the rags I called clothes until I couldn’t walk another step. I collapsed right there on the street, and…”
“And then Roxy found you, right?”
“Uh, spoiler alert, anyone?! This is the most important part of the story! Damn it, Fate…could you just learn to listen once in a while?”
“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”
Miria’s anger flared up again, but she regained her calm a few moments later and went on.
Roxy had found her and taken her back to Hart Manor, where Miria was nursed back to health. From the moment she recovered, Miria had been taken with Roxy’s all-encompassing generosity, and they’d been friends ever since.
“I didn’t think I could trust anybody until I met Roxy. You know what I mean, right? I mean, now I have Mugan—and Laine, too—but it all started with Lady Roxy, and I’m so, so grateful for her.”
“I see,” I said, processing her story.
“I signed up to join the kingdom’s army because I wanted to make myself useful, and I wanted to pay Lady Roxy back for all she’d done for me. Besides, magic sword skills are pretty rare. But then, when we were in the forest earlier, I needed her support, and I couldn’t do anything by myself… I failed her.”

Miria’s strong point was always her strength of will. Her tenacity. But here, she suddenly showed me vulnerability. I realized she tried to hide it behind her bravado and her attitude.

“You didn’t fail her,” I said as Barbatos Manor came into sight. “And if you’re still game, I’ll need your help to save Roxy. What do you say, Miria? Are you up for it?”

“I am! Thank you, Fate.”

There was a note of happiness in her voice as she clambered off my back. We had arrived at the manor gates.

“I told you all about me,” Miria said as we opened the gates, “so next time, you have to tell me about yourself. And I won’t take no for an answer!”

“Once we kill this goblin shaman, I’ll tell you everything you want to know. But it’s a long story, and you’re not allowed to fall asleep while I tell it, okay?”

“Well, that all depends on how good the story is. If it’s boring, I’m totally going to nap!”

“You don’t get to decide if my life is boring!”

Miria chuckled as she walked into the manor, then ran off to find Aaron. I’d always felt something of a distance between us, but now that distance seemed to have shrunk.

With Roxy still limp across my shoulder, I walked into the manor.

Chapter 9:
How to Calm a Mortal Sin

MEMIL WAS WAITING FOR US in the entrance hall, almost as if she had anticipated my return. There was a thin smile on her lips as she looked over at Roxy slumped over my shoulder.

“Ah, so it did happen,” she said knowingly. “And it looks like you’re just in time. Come this way…”

Memil had sensed the changes within Roxy when she’d seen us that morning. Roxy hadn’t let anything slip while in front of me, but apparently it had been a different story while Memil was helping her get changed. Roxy had suffered a momentary dizzy spell while getting to her feet and had been unsteady for a short time.

“You could have warned me…” I muttered.

“Roxy made me promise not to say anything. I’m sorry, my lord.”

“Ah, so that’s how it was.”

In the past, Memil had been involved in a scheme to send Roxy to Galia. She still regretted that, so she felt like she should at least respect Roxy’s wishes now. When she noticed that Roxy’s symptoms were similar to the side effects of Gluttony, she hoped she was just imagining things. All the same, she had decided to wait at the manor for our return, just in case. It was kind and thoughtful of her, and I was grateful as I followed her to my room.

My relationship with Memil was the exact opposite of what it once had been. Even so, a small part of that old relationship lingered, mainly because it had only been a month since Memil’s arrival. If our relationship was going to begin anew, we needed time for old wounds to heal. However, in that short time, we had developed a mutually beneficial arrangement. If we wanted to save Roxy’s life, we would need to make use of those benefits.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” I asked. “It hasn’t been long since last night.”

“It won’t be a problem,” Memil said. “I could do this every day.”

She flashed a crooked grin, and I couldn’t help but reply in kind with a wan smile, having gone through this process several times myself. I laid Roxy down on my bed and backed away. Meanwhile, Memil approached Roxy, whose face was pained.

“May I start?” Memil asked.

“Please. We have to save her from the Gluttony.”

“Very well.”

Memil leaned over Roxy and opened her mouth. Her canines lengthened into wickedly sharp fangs, which she plunged into Roxy's neck. This was the effect of Blood Lust, an affliction that Memil now bore thanks to her brother, Rafale.

According to Laine, Shin—the nightwalker source—was the cause of this curse. Like Rafale, Memil carried a part of Shin within her. Unlike her brother, however, it had become an integral part of her. This allowed Memil the ability to control her nightwalker power without falling under Shin's influence.

Normally, a bite from a nightwalker meant the victim turned into a living corpse, cursed to mindlessly attack anyone and everyone around them. However, Memil could control her power and prevent such things from happening. She wasn't truly a part of the nightwalker source; it was more like her existence hovered on its periphery. Blood Lust was the term we used for the times when she lost control of her urges.

To make matters worse, ordinary human blood wasn't enough to satiate Memil's Blood Lust. She had an instinctive understanding of what blood she truly thirsted for. The blood she craved…was mine.

On the day Aaron had first brought Memil from the castle to officially begin her duties as the Barbatos family servant, our eyes had locked and a devilish smile spread across her face. She hadn't even been aware of that smile. Rather, it had been an instinctual reaction driven by her thirst for my blood. Seeing that gaze for the first time left me in a cold sweat. I'd felt like prey stalked by a predator.

Since then, after Laine gave us a full explanation, I'd offered my blood to Memil once a week. If I didn't do so, there was every chance that Memil might lose herself to the Blood Lust and hurt Aaron, or Sahara, or even someone from the neighboring Hart Manor. Memil insisted that her Blood Lust would never get so bad that she would lose herself to it, so perhaps I worried too much, but still.

More importantly, the first time Memil drank deep of my blood led us to an important discovery: This act seemed to calm the ravening of my Gluttony. Greed speculated that Shin's Skill of Mortal Sin clashed with my Gluttony, and the two cancelled each other out. There was no conclusive proof either way, but Shin's ability to create nightwalkers was apparently a consequence of this skill. Now, a part of that skill resided in Memil, meaning that when she imbibed my blood, both of our powers were temporarily neutralized.

I watched as Memil drank up. From the rapturous expression on her face, I knew that she considered the blood delicious. I'd never seen her face when she drank my blood before, and I never could've imagined that it was something she did with such ecstasy.

"I'm done," Memil said, licking an errant drop of crimson from her lips. "Though I had to take quite a bit to tame that hunger within you this time."

She clarified that she'd had no choice but to take so much blood that my body could just barely function. Though it had calmed the Gluttonous urges

and numbed the agony, Roxy was so drained of blood that she was now borderline comatose.
“There was no other way,” said Memil. “Roxy will be fine for now, but if the Gluttony threatens to get out of control again, I won’t be able to stop it. I can’t take any more from her.”
“I see…” I said. “But thank you, Memil. You saved her.”
Memil turned away from me, a little embarrassed.
Regardless, Roxy’s condition was stable and under control, and I slumped into a chair by the side of the bed. “Can I ask you something, Memil?”
“What is it?”
“Is my blood delicious?”
“The taste of your blood…”
“Well?”
“It’s a secret!”
Why won’t she tell me?
My shoulders slumped further into the chair just as Miria burst into the room. Aaron and Sahara entered soon after. They looked worried, but their faces relaxed when we explained that Roxy’s condition was stable.
“My lord!” said Sahara. “I’ll go and call for Lady Aisha.”
“Good idea. Thank you, Sahara.”
“Don’t worry, I’m on it!”
With her pigtails bobbing left and right, Sahara ran back out of the room. I was relieved that she could keep such a cool head in a crisis.
In any case, it would be easier to take care of Roxy with Lady Aisha’s assistance. Because Memil was a maid of the Barbatos family, it would have been a little awkward for her to take care of Roxy by herself. I knew the Hart family wasn’t one to gossip about personal business, but their high rank meant that the servants of other families were extra careful to treat them with the appropriate level of respect.
For example, when I’d stayed the night at Hart Manor, Haru had fastidiously treated me as a holy knight from a visiting family, even though we were acquaintances who knew each other well. Though I often forgot the fact that I was a holy knight, it was a position of extreme privilege within the kingdom.
Even Memil breathed a sigh of relief when Sahara announced that she was going to get Lady Aisha. “I’m relieved to hear it,” she said. “Her visit will be an honor for humble maids such as Sahara and myself.”
Miria pushed past me and took hold of Roxy’s hand. “Lady Roxy, hang in there, please… Fate, are you sure she’ll be okay?”
“She’ll be fine for the time being.”
I hadn’t told Miria or Sahara exactly what we’d done to save Roxy, not wanting to reveal Memil’s Blood Lust. It didn’t feel like a good idea to say anything just yet, so I kept it a secret.
Memil had asked me not to tell others about her condition when she first arrived at the manor. Besides me, the only people who knew were Aaron,

Laine, Eris, and Eris's two white knights. Once all this was over, I'd have to add Roxy to that list, of course.
I empathized with Memil's desire to keep her Blood Lust secret. Ever since my Gluttony had awakened, the idea that the world might find out that I lived outside the boundaries of levels, stats, and skills—or that one day I would be consumed by my own skill and turn into a monster—terrified me. So much so that I hadn't even wanted to think about how Roxy would react.
I told Miria that Roxy was tired and needed rest, reassuring her that she'd be okay.
Then Aaron put a hand on my shoulder and gave me a nod. "What do we do now?" he asked. "You're still stuck in Roxy's body."
"We know the monster at the root of this curse. I'm going to hunt it down and kill it. Laine said that doing so would break the spell and return us back to our original bodies."
"Ah, so it's a spell that must be broken. It sounds similar to the lich lord and the curse it used to bind and control souls. Only this time, the curse doesn't control souls; it swaps them."
Aaron was referring to a crowned beast we had fought together, a lich lord known as the Genesis of Death. That had been back when I first met Aaron, during my journey to Galia. The lich lord, after taking up residence in Aaron's fallen estate, had bound the souls of the dead to our world and used their bodies as puppets. It had even manipulated the rotting cadavers of Aaron's wife and son to torment him over many long years. With my assistance, Aaron had persevered and destroyed the lich lord, thereby setting all the bound souls on their journey to the hereafter.
"Allow me to accompany you!" Aaron stated. "I will not allow such a creature to go unpunished!"
"Of course. I'll need as much help as I can get."
"Ah…I'm getting excited… I ache for the taste of battle!"
Recently, Aaron's work had kept him cooped up at the castle, so he longed for a chance to throw himself into the fury of a good fight. I knew he'd been waiting for the moment when I asked for his help again. After all, he'd entered the room with his sword at the ready, attached to his belt. He somehow always knew when there was a chance for battle. Already in the Domain of E, he was not only the most powerful old man I knew, he was getting stronger every day.
"I'll fight alongside you in Roxy's body," I said, "but if any of the monsters we encounter have reached the Domain of E, you'll have to take them alone. Your wounds from the fight with Rafale…have they healed?"
"I'm as healthy as I look. Leave it to me, Fate. I'm ready."
It was like the old guy was almost *too* prepared. Regardless, I felt certain of victory with Aaron by my side. We continued to discuss our plans as Miria strode toward us, urgency plainly written on her face.
"Don't forget me," she said.
"Ah, is Miria coming too, then, Fate?"

“Yes. We don’t know where the goblin shaman will be in the Hobgoblin Forest, so I think greater numbers work to our advantage. Besides, she has a personal stake in this.”
“Your zeal has been known to cause problems, but I can tell you know your way around a sword. Glad to have you on board.”
“I’ll do my best!” Miria giggled. “Wow, did I just get complimented by none other than the great Blessed Blade himself?”
When I complimented her, there was zero reaction, but when Aaron did, she was like a different person. I couldn’t work out why her reaction was so inconsistent, but I had to make sure she understood the gravity of the situation.
“Don’t puff yourself up too much, Miria. We can’t afford to lose this battle.”
“Uh, yeah. Of course I know that. Get off my back, Fate. Ugh, so annoying.”
I’d only wanted to warn her of the dangers ahead, but somehow, I had ended up looking like a jerk. All my good intentions turned to bitter ash in my mouth, and now Miria was parading around, looking so smug.
“Listen, Fate. I *have* to come along, because sometimes you get reckless and make mistakes.”
“What?! Don’t go acting like I’m the village idiot! She’s got me all wrong. Right, Aaron?”
Aaron remained silent for an unusually long time before opening his mouth. “Ah…sure,” he said finally.
Wait, does that mean that I really do *act a bit impulsively? Does that mean Miria is right? But…that’s impossible*. I would have looked to Greed for support, but it wasn’t like Roxy’s body had spontaneously developed Telepathy.
I set the black sword next to Roxy by the bed. “Look after her, Greed.”
There was no answer, but somewhere I felt like I could almost hear the black sword’s voice saying, “*You won’t have the help of yours truly this time, pal!*”
Just as we were leaving, Lady Aisha and Sahara burst in through the door. Usually so carefree, Lady Aisha’s face was now creased with worry. She knelt and gasped for breath, clearly exhausted from running the whole way here.
“How is she? How’s Roxy?” she asked.
“She’s stable. We’re heading out now to break the curse.”
“I see…”
Lady Aisha’s shoulders relaxed at the sight of Roxy peacefully sleeping. She had lost her husband, Lord Mason, less than a year ago, and now her only daughter was not only trapped in a different body, she was basically comatose. Though she had joked and teased us earlier that morning, it was clear now that her heart was full of worry. It was only natural.
As soon as we left the room, Lady Aisha said something that made me want to rush back immediately.

“This body is so sweaty. We need to wipe him down and change his clothes. Memil, Sahara, will you help me?”
I heard one of the girls gulp. Of course, it was Lady Aisha’s nature to prank and tease people. I was reminded once again that the worse the situation, the more she wanted to make light of it. In that way, Lady Aisha and Roxy were very much alike.
“But…that would mean his body would be naked.” Sahara said.
“And it *is* Fate’s body. Are we not stepping over a line?” Memil added.
“I…I agree with Memil!”
“What are you talking about?! It might be Fate’s body, but it’s my daughter on the inside! If I say it’s fine, then there’s no problem!”
“Oh, that’s a good point.”
“Yes, when you put it that way…”
Whoa! They’re agreeing so easily?!
“Okay, let’s get those clothes off!”
“I’m on it!”
“I’ll help!”
What was happening to my body?! And why did Memil and Sahara sound so eager?! I knew I had to rush back to stop them. Inviting Lady Aisha had been a terrible mistake. She was *not* the right person for the job! I reached my hand for the door, but—
“What are you doing, Fate?! We have no time to spare!”
“Come on, Fate,” added Miria. “We’ve got a goblin shaman to kill!”
Aaron grabbed my right arm and Miria grabbed my left. Marching together, they dragged me down the hall and out the front door.
“Wait! Guys, wait, I’ve got a bad feeling about what’s happening in my room! A really bad feeling!”
“Don’t be ridiculous. Aisha is in there specifically to tend to your body’s every need. What else is there to worry about?”
“I’m kind of jealous,” said Miria. “You’re lucky you get to receive Lady Aisha’s personal care firsthand…”
“Do you even listen to the things you say?” I moaned.
I looked up at my room as we left the manor. I could still hear their voices from the window. No matter how I looked at it, my body was in serious danger. If I couldn’t go back now, then I couldn’t waste any time; I had to slay that goblin shaman *fast*. I held the grip of the holy sword that hung from my sword belt and began to run. At last, I felt comfortable moving in Roxy’s body.
With that, we moved steadily toward the forest, back to where we had found the goblin shaman’s arm.

Chapter 10:
Miria's Hard-Fought Battle

WE PASSED THROUGH the Merchant District and continued toward the western gate—and the Hobgoblin Forest beyond. I had been there with Roxy and Miria only a day before, and now I was back with Miria and Aaron in tow.

Aaron was a battle-hardened veteran, and having him with us gave me confidence. Miria's calm expression told me that she felt exactly the same.

The western gate was silent. Once brimming with the hustle and bustle of merchants and their caravans, that had all ceased after the goblins began to act strangely.

Aaron scanned the deserted streets in surprise. "I…didn't think it was this bad. News of the goblins reached the castle, of course, but this is far worse than what was reported."

"I was as surprised as you when I saw it yesterday," I said.

"That makes three of us!" said Miria. "I was feeling peckish and wanted to buy something to eat, but all the food stalls were shut down. Talk about disappointing."

As usual, Miria decided to butt into serious conversations with trivial addendums. At the same time, I was glad to see that her usual boundless energy had returned. Even Aaron managed to chuckle.

"So the lives of Roxy and Fate are not the only matters hanging in the balance," he said, stroking his beard. "Soon, the kingdom's food supplies will run dry from lack of trade."

The kingdom didn't grow most of the food it needed. It depended on trade with other regions and would be in serious trouble if there were shortages of basic staples such as salt and flour. Having spent five years living in the kingdom's slums, I felt this truth in my bones.

The accepted trade route to the castle went through Tetra. Produce from outside regions was stored and quarantined there before being moved. No other routes were permitted, and breaking this rule came with strict punishment.

Unfortunately, because that route passed by the Goblin Grasslands and the Hobgoblin Forest, very few merchants could make it through at present. A handful had, of course, but they were the folks willing to risk their lives delivering produce simply to gain a competitive edge on their peers. Either way, their wares weren't nearly enough to meet the kingdom's needs.

In times like these, those who lived in the slums, who had the least power to affect change, were hit the hardest. When I'd lived there, I had experienced an existential terror at least once a year, whenever some terrifying monster caused havoc on the trade routes and slowed the arrival of food. It had been so bad at times that I'd thought I would starve to death. The ravening of my

Gluttony during those famines had sent me into the pits of despair. Even now, looking at the deserted streets of the Merchant District, I had a feeling that the slums were in for another food crisis in the near future.
“We have to fix this, and we have to do it today,” I said.
“I agree. The sooner the better,” said Aaron.
“Of course we do, Fate! Roxy’s life is on the line here! Get it together, please!”
The way Miria said that distinctly made it sound like she thought I didn’t understand the urgency of the situation. She looked a bit angry, too, but perhaps she was being considerate in her own way. Miria and I were a little closer now that I’d learned of her past. I wanted to try and bridge the gap between us even further. After all, wherever Roxy went, Miria was bound to follow. It would be best for all of us if we got along.
I also happened to be in Roxy’s body, so no matter what I did, I knew Miria wouldn’t dare attack me. I gathered my wits and gave Miria a gentle pat on the head. It was the same gesture Roxy always offered to me.
“Thank you for being worried about me, Miria,” I said, still patting her on the head. “You’re such a good girl.”
“That’s unfair, Fate.” Miria’s face flushed red. “It’s against the rules to say something like that with Lady Roxy’s most affectionate expression on your face…”
Even as she tried to protest, it wasn’t long before her features softened into rapturous bliss.
“It’s not really Lady Roxy…” she muttered, placating herself. “It’s not really Lady Roxy…”
“What are you doing, playing around?!” Aaron scolded us. “There’s no time to lose. You can do whatever it is you’re doing as much as you want once this is all over!”
“Sorry, Aaron!” Miria and I said in unison.
Aaron strode out of the western gate. Miria walked beside me as I followed him.
“I can’t believe Aaron got angry at me,” she whispered. “It’s all your fault!”
“I couldn’t help it,” I said. “You looked so happy…”
“No way. You’re lying.”
“Yeah, you really did. Do you need me to prove it?”
“I said that’s against the rules!”
Miria ran off toward Aaron, and I followed after her. We were walking into battle, but our hearts were calm and ready, and I was grateful to Miria. She always managed to improve morale in her own way.

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We reached that fateful clearing deep within the heart of the foreboding Hobgoblin Forest. The signs of our recent battle surrounded us. I could still make out the remnants of the strange magical seal etched into the ground.

This was the very spot where the goblin shaman had cast its soul-swap spell. From here, we could easily survey our surroundings, but we were totally out in the open. Despite the possible dangers, this was the best place from which to begin our search.

“Are you ready, Fate?”

“Let’s do it,” I said with a nod.

Aaron and I focused our senses, reaching out to search for the magical energy of the monsters in the Hobgoblin Forest. The forest was more than five miles wide; a thorough search would take time. Aaron estimated that we needed at least fifteen minutes to sweep through the arcane energies of the entire forest. We couldn’t move while we focused our energy, leaving us completely defenseless against any goblin attacks.

Aaron was in the Domain of E, so he didn’t have to worry about lower-level monsters. However, the fight with the nightwalkers still loomed in our minds. Our enemy then had been beyond our understanding, and we couldn’t rule out the possibility that the shaman might also attack with something that ignored the rules of the Domain of E.

In other words, overconfidence could prove fatal. The ancient monster we faced—the goblin shaman—had proven itself capable of strategic thought by cornering us in our first battle. It was no ordinary goblin; that much was certain. Aaron and I agreed that it was better to treat this opponent like an intelligent being rather than a typical monster.

“Miria, we’ll be counting on you to protect us if anything happens.”

“Leave it to me! I will protect Lady Roxy’s body until the end! Anyone who tries to interfere will find themselves a pile of ashes at the end of my flamberge!”

“Thank you, Miria.”

Miria drew her fiery blade and kept watch. Aaron and I stood with our backs to each other, our minds focused and concentrating. Aaron studied the northern side of the forest while I searched the south, the direction in which I had fired the Bloody Ptarmigan the day before.

The goblin shaman had been only about a quarter mile away when it attacked us. My guess was that was probably the maximum distance from which the goblin shaman could cast its curse. Once the spell was cast, however, it could keep the spell going from a much further range. If the monster had to stay within that quarter mile, we would’ve already discovered it prowling the kingdom. All the same, I hoped that the goblin shaman had remained in the forest, and I prayed that the wounds it suffered had prevented it from straying too far.

I felt for the flow of magical energy, reaching out past what my eyes could see.

No way!

Aaron must have felt it too, because he unsheathed his sword and switched to a fighting stance.

“Wait!” Miria cried. “You have to keep searching. Let me handle them!”

“But…”
“Trust me, please. I’m one of the strongest soldiers in the kingdom’s army. I won’t let you down!”
Miria pointed her blade toward the three approaching goblin kings. I couldn’t believe there were still some left; they were so rare that even encountering *one* was considered noteworthy. They weren’t alone, either. I sensed around thirty hobgoblins with them.
If they all fire at once, we’re screwed, I thought.
That was exactly what they did. Arrows flew at us from every angle. It was beyond what one person could manage by themselves.
“Miria!”
“I said I’ve got it!”
There was a strength to Miria’s voice, completely unlike that of the foolish, headstrong girl we were used to. She thrust her sword into the ground, and as she did, I felt her magical powers suddenly increase.
Pillars of fire erupted toward the sky, surrounding us. These thick walls of flame incinerated all incoming arrows before they reached us. The hobgoblins continued to fire, but their arrows never landed.
“Incredible, Miria!”
“It’s the ace up my sleeve, but I can’t hold it for long. Please hurry.”
“We’ll find it!”
The goblin kings, enraged by the failure of their archers, swung their huge, improvised clubs at the wall of flames. Those clubs were simply large branches ripped from even more massive trees, so they burned to ashes against the magical fire. However, the fact that they thought attacking the flames with wooden weapons would do them any good told us that they were little more than ordinary goblins.
Ten minutes into fending off the goblin attacks, Miria’s breathing came in ragged gasps, sweat dripping from her face. She was nearing the limits of her magical endurance.
“How’s it going?” she asked. “Are you close?”
“I’m not picking anything up,” said Aaron, “not even other groups of goblins… It’s like they vanished. I don’t think there’s much of a reason to continue searching north. Fate?”
“I’m picking up lots of goblins to the south. It wouldn’t surprise me if that’s where all the goblins from the grasslands have gathered. They’re concentrated two and a half miles from our position. I suspect we’ll find our sneaky goblin shaman there. There’s too many of them to get a clear reading. I need your help, Aaron.”
“I can help.” Aaron’s eyes darted toward the battle around us. “But Miria is at her limit. It might be better if I take on the goblins surrounding us.”
Miria shook her head, droplets of sweat flying from her brow. “I can handle it! Let me do this. I can still fight.”
“I like your moxie,” Aaron said. “Very well, I’ll put my faith in you. Fate, let’s find us a monster.”

"Okay!"

Aaron and I focused on searching for our target to the south. As we did, I felt a faint pulse of a magical energy distinct from that of the surrounding goblins and hobgoblins. It was weak, but I recognized it.

"I found it," I said. "It's three miles from here, near the southern edge of the forest. It might be trying to escape."

"Then we'd best hurry," Aaron replied. "But before that... Miria, we're done!"

As the wall of fire extinguished, Aaron and I dove out, our swords slashing turbulent whorls through the smoke. They found their respective marks, separating the heads cleanly from the goblin kings' bodies. With momentum carrying us forward, we made quick work of the hiding hobgoblins, effortlessly carving a crimson swath of carnage through their ranks. We didn't even need our holy sword techniques.

As we stood knee-deep in goblin corpses, I felt a strange warmth suffuse my body, like new strength blooming within me. I was so confused that I asked Aaron about it. He laughed so hard that he had to clutch his stomach.

"Congratulations, Fate. You've just experienced your first level up!"

"A level up?! So this is what everyone talks about! It's like I'm bursting with power. This feels amazing!"

"Now that you mention it, your Gluttony skill prevents you from collecting spheres and leveling up, doesn't it?" Aaron mused. "You can only experience it now because you're in Roxy's body."

It felt truly incredible. I could see myself becoming addicted to the sensation. I was suddenly jealous of regular adventurers who got to experience it. In my case, I lived in fear of the hunger of my Gluttony, even as I gained more stats. Hell, when I gained too many stats, the ecstasy of my Gluttony caused me agony. The difference was jaw-dropping. Leveling up in this body was pure bliss.

"They say that a level up is a blessing from the god Laplace. That's why it feels like it does. Multiple level ups are even stronger."

"Seriously?!"

"Come now, Fate," Aaron said sternly. "This greed of yours isn't entirely Roxy-like."

"Oh. Sorry..."

The ecstasy of the level up was so powerful that I'd almost forgotten I was still in Roxy's body. I was hungry to feel it again.

"Fate, that's enough about levels. Go see to Miria. She put everything she had into protecting us."

"I'm on it."

Miria sat on the ground, shuddering with exhaustion. I placed a hand on her head.

"You did good," I said.

Miria giggled. "You can count on me when you need me."

"Then you'll be coming with us, won't you?"

“You bet!”

Miria smiled as she grasped my hand and pulled herself to her feet. I almost couldn’t believe she was capable of such a cute grin.

Chapter 11:
Monster Hideout

THE TREES GREW BIGGER as we headed deeper south, their branches stretching out as they fought for the sunlight. It was still early afternoon, but the forest was as dark as night. Aaron and I used our Night Vision skills while Miria relied on her flaming sword as a torch. We ran through the forest in pursuit of the goblin shaman.

"This is the first time I've been this deep into the forest," said Miria.

"Same," I said. "The trees are so much bigger and older here than those closer to the forest edge."

We had to be careful not to trip on the roots snaking across the ground. At our speed, a small trip could turn into a huge stumble. Aaron leaped through the trees like he'd done this a thousand times. I tried to follow his lead, but I almost fell when my leg caught on a tree root.

"Fate, don't forget it's Roxy's body you're inside of," Aaron said. "Take good care of it."

"Yeah! I won't forgive you if you get Roxy's body all scratched up and injured!" Miria warned.

"I'll be careful, really..." I pouted.

I was trying my best to get used to Roxy's body, but my occasional missteps showed I wasn't totally there. I figured my best strategy was to make sure Aaron was always in a position to protect me.

Aaron was in the lead, so I asked him where we were.

"I must admit that I'm not terribly well versed in this part of the forest," he said. "But I believe we're in its oldest section. According to the Military District's researchers, it has existed for more than four thousand years. Take a look at that gigantic tree. It must be at least ten feet wide."

"Imagine how many houses you could make with all that wood," I said.

Aaron laughed. "Do that and you'll only earn yourself a strict punishment from the kingdom. When Seifort was founded, well before the hobgoblins moved in and gave the forest its name, this was considered a sacred place of worship. The deceased were cremated here. Those old traditions were eventually lost, and now the forest is little more than a den of vile monsters."

"Does that mean this is the resting place of the kingdom's ancestors?"

"That was a long, long time ago, so it's nothing for us to worry about. However, even if the rest of the world has forgotten, I want you to remember the importance of this place and why the kingdom treasures it so. You are right; it is the final resting place of our ancestors."

"We won't forget. Right, Miria?"

“Got it! The last thing I want is to have to deal with a bunch of angry zombies crawling up from the ground because they can’t rest in peace!” Miria visibly shivered as she ran. Was she afraid of the undead?

“Sounds like somebody doesn’t like zombies,” I said.

“Have you ever cut one with a flaming sword? Oh my god, the smell! It’s beyond awful. And then it gets into your clothes and your armor. It even seems to stick with you when you jump in the bath… Just remembering it makes me feel sick. I *much* prefer skeletons. They’re just dry bones, so they burn great and don’t smell like anything! I think it’s safe to say that when it comes to the undead, I’m a skeleton fan!”

“I see…”

I had assumed she would say that she disliked their horrific appearance, or scream about them being terrifying, but I had been way off the mark. It was just like Miria to surprise me.

“Well,” I said, “if we find any zombies up ahead, you can leave them to me!”

“No way! We can’t let Lady Roxy’s precious body be tainted by the undead! If there are zombies ahead—” I waited for Miria to say she’d fight them off, but “—Aaron, we’re counting on you to take out any zombies we find!”

Aaron’s eyes went wide with surprise. “What?! Me?!” he shouted, surprised that he had suddenly been roped into this absurd discussion.

I couldn’t believe that Miria had just bossed the Blessed Blade around like that! She was going to be one hell of a gutsy adventurer in the future. In response, Aaron smiled and nodded toward Miria. It didn’t really matter what she said anymore; she was like a granddaughter in Aaron’s eyes. Then again, he was like that with Myne—and with Memil. He even talked about adopting Sahara sometimes.

Since defeating the Genesis of Death at Hausen, Aaron had finally been able to let go of what had always haunted him: his failure to save his family. It seemed like he’d been able to release a lot of pent-up feelings since coming back to Seifort. We’d gone drinking one night and he’d admitted to me, “Fate, before I die, I want a big family!” I’d always assumed he was drunk and joking, but as time went by, I was starting to think he was serious. Miria was an orphan, too, which meant there was always the chance that Aaron would just bring her into the family. But Miria and I as siblings?! It was already hard enough bridging the gap with Memil…

“If we see any zombies, they’ll quickly find themselves purified by the light of my Grand Cross!”

“You’re the best, Aaron! And so reliable, unlike *somebody* I know.” Miria gave me a dirty look.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?” I said.

“I’m kidding!” Miria giggled, poking her tongue out at me. “You always take things so seriously, Fate. Lady Roxy always talks about it. ‘He’s so easy to fool,’ she says. ‘I just can’t help myself,’ she says.”

Aaron couldn’t help but laugh too. “She’s so right. Fate doesn’t understand women at all. Miria, perhaps you should teach him a thing or two.”

"Yeah, I don't know. But I guess if Fate asked *really* nicely, I might consider not turning him down point blank."
I couldn't believe it! All of a sudden, Miria was looking down on me like I was beneath her!
I'll show you! I thought. One day I'm going to be a lady-killer gentleman, just like Aaron! You just wait!
But Miria saw right through me. "Although now that I think about it, I can't do anything for him until he stops having an internal panic attack every time Lady Roxy holds his hand."
"What?! How do you even know about that?!"
"Because I'm always watching, that's why! Would you like to practice holding hands with me?"
"You're trying to get back at me because I patted your head earlier, aren't you?"
Miria flashed a smile filled with smug satisfaction. "I am *so* glad you noticed! Don't think you can bend me to your will with a simple pat on the head. I'm not so easily fooled!"
"Oh, really?"
"What's with that suspicious face?! Stop doing that with Lady Roxy's face!"
"Maybe I don't want to."
"Fate!"
We bounded along at high speed, bickering as we approached our destination. When we got there, Aaron raised a hand for us to stop. He brought us into a huddle and whispered, "I'm sorry to spoil the fun, but we have to tread carefully from here on out."
"Sorry, Aaron," Miria and I said in unison.
It seemed like whenever Miria and I were together, we seemed to lose focus on the big picture. Miria evidently felt the same way, given her irritated expression. I still got the feeling she wasn't treating the situation with the gravity it deserved, so I figured I'd give her a little of the Roxy treatment.
"Miria, do make sure you're prepared for what's ahead. We really don't know what's waiting for us in there, you know."
"What?! How dare you talk to me like Lady Roxy and—and power my enthusiasm to even greater heights!"
Looked to me like the Roxy treatment worked like a charm. Miria gave me a curt nod, then gripped her sword as she looked around carefully.
The goblin shaman was slowly making its way south. As we'd expected, it was significantly slowed by its wounds.
"I can sense other monsters nearby," I said. "I'm guessing hobgoblins."
"And it seems like there are no goblin kings anymore," added Aaron. "We finished the last of them earlier."
"I'm so jealous," Miria said. "I wish I could sense magical energy in the air..."
"When this is over, I'll teach you how," I said.
"Really? Promise?"

“Promise. But first, we have to put an end to the goblin shaman, and quickly!”
“Got it!”
We proceeded forward in a triangle formation with Aaron at the front, and Miria and me on his left and right as support. Aaron headed in a straight line directly for the goblin shaman. If any goblins tried to attack him from the sides, they would have to deal with us at his flanks.
We still couldn’t see our target, but we were outnumbered, so it was likely they’d sense us coming as soon as we were in range. When facing overwhelming opposition, the ideal strategy was to take the leader’s head as soon as possible. Without a leader, routing the remaining monsters would be easy, as they’d fall into a confused chaos.
Aaron turned to us both, his eyes sharp. “Ready?”
“Ready.”
“Then let’s go.”
Aaron stood tall and took off at high speed. It was hard to believe he could run so confidently on ground so unsteady. Fortunately, I knew Roxy’s body now, and it wasn’t hard for me to keep up. I looked over at Miria to the side, her teeth clenched as she struggled to keep up. She was tough as nails; only a few moments ago, she’d created a wall of flame and fought until she’d completely exhausted her magical reserves. She didn’t need anybody asking if she was all right. She was a true warrior.
The hobgoblins hiding among the trees were flustered by our head-on approach and began to attack. As predicted, there were more than a hundred of them. But we didn’t have time to fight them all, so Miria and I focused on cutting down their arrows and spears.
“These goblins are a nuisance,” said Aaron. “Fate, can you handle them?”
“Of course,” I said.
An enormous group of hobgoblins stood like a wall before us. I didn’t know how desperate they were, but this seemed like it was their last line of defense. I poured magical energy into my holy sword and prepared the legendary holy knight tech-art, Grand Cross. With this, I could send out an explosion of holy energy, covering a wide range.
It was my first time using the tech-art in Roxy’s body, but I could tell she’d learned to control it. Perhaps my soul and her body were a surprisingly good match. I’d grown comfortable in Roxy’s body in less than a day, and I doubted it would’ve been so quick with anyone else.
As more magical energy built up in my sword, it grew stronger. At last, I swung the blade toward the hobgoblins as I unleashed the Grand Cross. The jostling hobgoblins gaped as holy light spread across the ground beneath their feet. Just as they realized what was going on, the purifying light shot up from the ground.
Roxy had truly mastered this holy sword skill. The speed at which I could charge and unleash it were clearly a result of her tireless training. The

hobgoblins raised their arms to shield against the blinding light, but were obliterated nonetheless.
As the monsters fell, a huge number of spheres poured into my body. It wasn’t enough for a level up, but they sent energy surging through my limbs. I was shocked to discover that monster hunting could bring such bliss, and I had to wonder if this feeling was the real reason so many adventurers and holy knights constantly craved battle and obsessed over becoming more powerful.
With the path now clear, Aaron leaped over the hobgoblin corpses and dove deeper into the forest. The goblin shaman was ahead, in a large hollow nestled between the roots of a huge tree. It was dangerous to jump in unprepared, especially if there was a trap waiting for us. Aaron knew this too, which was why he’d been charging his Grand Cross ever since we’d locked down the goblin shaman’s location. Now that Aaron was in the Domain of E, the power of his Grand Cross would make mine look like a flickering candle.
It was hard not to feel a little guilty about the fact that Aaron’s attack would blow away some of the grand, sacred trees of this ancient holy site. However, leaving these ancient monsters alone would only further endanger the citizens of the kingdom, and when it came to choosing one over the other, Aaron’s decision had been made long ago.
Aaron’s voice rose to a shout, and he directed his attack toward the hollow where the goblin shaman hid.
“Grand Cross!” he roared.
The Grand Cross was usually an attack that targeted a wide area, but Aaron was able to dramatically increase the power of its purifying light by concentrating it on a much smaller zone. A pillar of holy light ran through the very center of the towering tree and split the heavens themselves.

Chapter 12:
The Puppet Master of Souls

WHEN THE BLINDING LIGHT of the Grand Cross finally faded, the huge tree at the center of the Hobgoblin Forest had been all but incinerated down to its roots. All that remained was a gaping, smoldering hole at its base.

“I…might have gone a little too far,” said Aaron.

“No, I think that was just right,” I said.

A day earlier, I had ripped up a quarter mile of the forest in my attempt to kill the goblin shaman. By comparison, Aaron’s Grand Cross had hit its mark with pinpoint accuracy. The difference in our levels of control was obvious. It was clear to me that my fighting style was wild and unruly, and I was reminded that I needed to fix my bad habit of relying on Greed’s secret techniques. After all, not only did they take a heavy toll on my stats, but they were supposed to be finishing blows.

The main problem is Greed, I thought. *He’s always pushing me to use them.* I couldn’t help but think of my partner as I gripped the holy sword in my hand.

“We’ve struck a strong first blow!” cried Miria.

Aaron laughed. “Indeed we have. Miria, can we leave the rest of the hobgoblins here to you?”

“Consider it done!”

“That’s the spirit!”

Miria looked overjoyed at Aaron’s praise, and she looked around at the monsters surrounding us as they prepared to attack. She briefly turned to me without a word and nodded with a knowing glance. She understood what she had to do, and her face wore the grit and determination of a true adventurer.

“Fate, we’ve no time to lose,” said Aaron.

“On my way.”

The magical energy of the goblin shaman had weakened, but the monster was still alive. That was clear enough due to the fact that I was still in Roxy’s body. Aaron and I leaped down into the hole as the sounds of battle erupted above us.

We fell through darkness for a short while, but soon the floor came into sight, pulsing with a dull crimson light. We dropped to the ground prepared for an ambush, but none came.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“By the looks of it, I’d say it’s some kind of ancient ruin. The floor is pulsing with light.”

“It kind of reminds me of the Galian technology they use in the Military District.”

“Hmm, it’s definitely similar…”

I couldn’t have imagined that a place like this was hidden beneath the Hobgoblin Forest. Even Aaron, who knew the history of the kingdom, was shocked. The pulsing light didn’t reveal all of the ruins, but I got the sense that they were very large. It reminded me of the cavern beneath the great canyon in Galia, a home to fossils of long-extinct monsters.
Does that mean that this place…? I thought.
Aaron spoke the rest of my thoughts for me. “Why would there be ancient Galian ruins in a place like this?!”
“Perhaps Eris knows… But she’s away.”
“Then there’s no other choice. We keep moving.”
“I’m right behind you.”
When I looked more carefully at the floor, I noticed bloodstains. Fresh blood. Aaron knelt to examine one.
“These are very recent,” he said. “And they’re headed for the entrance to the ruins.”
He pointed ahead, where the trail of blood continued. The goblin shaman had already lost a lot of blood from the wound where its right arm had been. Now it had lost even more. Judging by the way the bloodstains scraped along the ground, it seemed the monster could barely even walk.
“It must be exhausted,” Aaron continued. “But don’t forget: A cornered monster is a monster at its most dangerous.”
“We also know that it has the ability to swap souls, so it could be hiding other dangerous tricks up its sleeve.”
“Exactly.”
We continued through the ruins, carefully watching our surroundings. The walls of the ruins, like the floor, pulsed with red light. It was like a frightening warning, warding off any who dared to visit. There was no trace of hobgoblins there. There was only silence, occasionally punctuated by the echo of water dripping from the earthen ceiling.
It was as though the ruins breathed through the pulsing light, but all traces of life were long gone. We pressed onward and inside.
“There’s nothing here,” said Aaron. “Fate, can you sense anything?”
“I can only sense one thing,” I said.
It was the goblin shaman. Its energy was growing weaker still, so weak that I wondered if it might die if we just left it alone.
“It’s very close to death,” Aaron said. “If it came to this place, then it came for a reason. I intend to find out what that reason is.”
“Perhaps there’s a way for it to heal its wounds?”
These were Galian ruins. We couldn’t rule out any possibility. But Aaron shook his head. “I’m not sure about that. There is no magic capable of healing, other than your fourth-level secret technique and the Health Regen skill some monsters carry. But do you know why such healing magic doesn’t exist?”
“I’ve heard that the gods did not grant humans that power.”

Aaron nodded, listening as I gave him the answer we had all been taught.
“And why do you think the gods did not grant us such powers?”
I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came. I realized that I didn’t know. Aaron took my silence as my answer, and we continued into the ruins, looking out for traps as we walked.
“Nobody knows the truth,” Aaron said, “You may not believe what I’m about to tell you, but I have a theory…”
Aaron shared his thoughts. The world was full of skills that could be divided into attack, magic, and support. No matter what skills they possessed, even the mightiest warriors fell when they took enough damage. In a duel, the battle ended when one opponent yielded, but what about when kingdoms went to war? In a world with healing magic, injuries could be mended as soon as they were inflicted, and healed soldiers would be sent back out to battle. This would give rise to soldiers who could fight eternally, leading to potentially never-ending wars.
“I believe it’s possible that healing magic once existed in the time when Galia prospered,” Aaron said.
“That’s impossible…”
“Then what of your Twilight Healing? It is a fantastic power, imbued in a weapon from a time long, long ago. It seems your black sword is a weapon with a deep connection to Galia.”
“I can’t say much for certain. Greed isn’t one to talk much about himself.”
“Be that as it may, it would be wise for us to arrange an audience with Eris once she returns to ask her about Galia. The less we know, the more we’re left on the back foot.”
Was it really possible that healing magic had once existed? If that were true, and if it had continued to exist, would my parents still be alive? Perhaps Roxy’s father Lord Mason might not have met his maker in Galia either.
Thinking about these possibilities was pointless, yet I couldn’t help but wonder where I would be had my parents not died when they did. What kind of life would I have been living now? Would I have still awakened the true power of my Gluttony? Or would I have become a simple farmer, living a simple life tilling the fields? Either way, I never would have met Roxy. Of that I was almost certain.
Aaron’s stride came to a halt upon the damp, rocky path. It was wet and slick from many long years of neglect. An unusual moss had grown over it, somehow feeding off the strange red light of the ruins. I was sure that I had seen it somewhere before. The memory came to me—it was the same moss in Galia, a strange plant that devoured people from within.
“Be careful, Aaron,” I said. “If you ingest the spores from that moss, it will start growing inside of you.”
“Just as I thought. I had a feeling I’d seen it somewhere before.”
I tried to burn away the moss with my Fireball spell, but then realized I was still stuck in Roxy’s body.

Aaron grinned at my mistake. “If we can’t burn it down, then we hold our breath and pass through as quickly as possible.”
“Got it.”
Once we passed the moss, we found ourselves before a massive door made of some sort of strange metal. It was shut tight, not budging an inch no matter how hard we pushed. Aaron unsheathed his sword and began pouring the energy of the Grand Cross into its blade. The tech-art dramatically increased the power of his holy sword.
“I’m going to cut down the door,” Aaron said. “Be on guard when we head inside!”
As I unsheathed my own blade, Aaron cut through the door like it was butter, opening a way through. We burst inside, but were shocked to see what awaited us.
“Why… What…what is this?”
“This is awful…”
It was a sight we’d seen before in Rafale’s research facility. Glass canisters lined the floor, filled with a red liquid. Inside each was a naked human body, at least twenty of them. I walked closer to see if any still lived.
“They’re dead,” I said.
“But they still look alive,” said Aaron.
If the red liquid in the canisters was the same as what Rafale had used, then it was possible the liquid kept their bodies from rotting. Laine had made that discovery when she analyzed the liquid after the incident. We looked around the strange room until Aaron noticed something.
“I know these faces,” he said. “They’re all people who’ve recently gone missing. Sketches of their faces have been circulating the castle.”
Merchants had to pass by the Hobgoblin Forest to get to the kingdom, so it wasn’t surprising that many had found themselves on the wrong end of goblin attacks. However, the problem wasn’t that people had been attacked—it was that their bodies had been brought to this place and stored. What in the world were they trying to do, and why did it require so many bodies?
“It doesn’t look like they’re storing these bodies for food, does it?”
“If that were true, we’d have found traces of them when we entered. But there’s nothing like that here. It’s too clean.”
Monsters had a taste for human flesh. I didn’t know why, and it seemed that Aaron didn’t know either.
“When I was a boy, I was taught that monsters saw humans as their mortal enemies,” he said. “I think it was the same for all holy knights. I was told that if you placed a human and some kind of livestock in front of a monster, the monster would always attack the human. I always thought it was because humans are far more delectable to them, but if that’s the case…I don’t know what to make of this situation at all.”
“It doesn’t make sense for them to have done this to humans they’ve attacked. Goblins always eat their victims right there on the spot.”

We had both heard the rumors of monsters that, when driven to extremes by starvation, ate humans alive. It was admittedly true that the goblin shaman was different from the rest of its ilk, and it had used its intelligence to hex me and Roxy. But that had been in battle. Even if we were in its home, that didn't explain the people stored in glass tubes. It was almost as if the goblin shaman knew this place's true purpose.

A shiver ran down my spine. There was too much we didn't know about these ancient monsters. As I stared around at the agonized faces trapped in the canisters, the ruins suddenly lit up. The light blinded me momentarily because I'd been using my Night Vision.

Then, from the other side of the room, we heard a hoarse, rasping voice.

"Do not…interfere…humans…"

Aaron and I looked in the direction of the voice.

"But that's…" I gaped.

"I don't believe it…" muttered Aaron.

The voice had come from the goblin shaman, missing its right arm, and with one of its left eyes crushed. The socket was crusted with blood. Just as Laine had told me earlier, it had a gray body only slightly smaller than that of a hobgoblin. It also wasn't as muscular as a hobgoblin, likely because it avoided close-range battle. Instead, it had long, lanky arms and legs, and it looked like it was quick on its feet. It had already proved its speed by dodging my Bloody Ptarmigan attack.

The goblin shaman held its staff in its left hand and looked to be readying a spell. The eye sockets of the skulls at the head of its staff lit up with blood-red light, and I felt a strange magic pierce the air, like it was trying to finish the soul-swap spell from earlier.

I was shocked to see a monster capable of human speech, but I readied my sword all the same. As Aaron and I raced toward it, the goblin shaman snarled at us, its remaining eyes filled with pure hatred.

The way it glared at us felt uniquely human.

Chapter 13:
The Results of Inhuman Decay

THE GOBLIN SHAMAN was almost dead on its feet, but it squeezed what energy it still had into the staff raised above its head and intoned:

“Grant me…power…the Door…to Distant Lands…”

We had to stop it right away. We moved in to attack, but when the goblin shaman finished speaking, the glass canisters filling the room began to crack.

“What’s happening?”

The people in the canisters slumped to the floor as red liquid flooded the floor. They writhed in agony.

“But…but the people in those canisters are dead…” I said in disbelief.

It was an impossible sight; there was no doubt they were dead. At first, I thought they were nightwalkers, but their pupils didn’t turn blood-red, nor did fangs sprout from their mouths. These corpses simply writhed in pain.

The voices from the bodies were beastly, the ominous echo of monsters pulsing within them. In the next instant, they began to transform. Aaron rushed over and pulled me away from a corpse.

“Fate, get to safety! I can sense it. These bodies are no longer human!”

“But how—?”

The corpses on the floor were changing, transforming in a way I had seen before. It was Soul Decay. I still remembered the creatures that Hado and Rafale had become when they had given up what was left of their humanity. Greed said it was what happened when a person lost their soul in the Domain of E. They lost all sense of reason, transforming into creatures that knew only violence. Though their attacks were simple, lacking any thought, their stats remained in the Domain of E.

While I was still in Roxy’s body, I could do nothing to harm them. All I could do was rely on Aaron, but it was twenty-four against one. The odds were stacked against him.

“Aaron, how strong are they? What are their stats?”

Aaron had the Identify skill, and if we wanted to use it, the best time was before the monsters recognized us as a threat. I needed to know how deep into the Domain of E they were.

“These monsters are called ogres. Their stats are at the lower limits of the Domain of E. Not very high. But that goblin shaman is not in the Domain of E. I’ll draw the attention of the ogres, so it’s up to you to put a stop to the shaman!”

“Got it!”

The ogres were about twice Aaron’s height. Their bodies were rough-hewn and bursting with muscles. If they caught me in the grips of their large hands, they would have no trouble crushing my bones to dust.

This whole situation is crazy… I thought. I can’t make sense of it.
I knew only one thing: I had an enemy to defeat. I broke into a sprint, hoping to get around the ogres before they were aware of their surroundings, but I didn’t get far.
The goblin shaman shouted, and the ogres began moving. They marched in formation as if they were a squadron of soldiers. The shaman was using some kind of spell to control them. One of the ogres rushed toward me, its giant hand reaching out to crush me.
“Fate!”
Aaron ducked in and grabbed me, pulling me clear of the attack as the ogre roared. But Aaron wasn’t done yet. He stepped in and raised his sword over his head and brought it straight down, cleaving the ogre in half. The two halves fell cleanly apart.
“They’re strong, but their attacks have no technique. They’re no better than orcs. At least an orc can think for itself.”
Aaron pointed to the movement of the other ogres, which was uniform, robotic, and easy to follow. It looked as if the goblin shaman struggled to control them.
“The goblin is pushing past its limits,” Aaron said. “I will cut a path, Fate.”
Even if they were in the Domain of E, the ogres weren’t high in that hierarchy. They were no match for Aaron, whose strength had only grown since the battle with Rafale. The goblin shaman’s face suddenly lost confidence as it realized it had underestimated Aaron’s might. The monster’s face contorted into a grimace of frustration.
“Why do you…interfere…?” it snarled. “The research…bears fruit…”
Aaron cut down a third ogre, then suddenly stopped. He looked down at his sword with a pained frown. Even though he had the advantage, he was now being pushed backward. Something was happening to his holy sword.
“My blade,” he said, “it’s starting to disintegrate!”
It was a sword forged from orichalcum—a rare ore mined in Galia. I’d heard that such blades were strong enough to withstand the acid of slime monsters. On top of that, Aaron had imbued his sword with the power of the Grand Cross, making it even stronger than usual. Despite all this, his blade was eroding.
There had to be something in ogre blood that caused this. I wondered if it had something to do with what the goblin had said. But there was no time to think about it now. I tried to offer Roxy’s holy sword to Aaron, but he shook his head.
“I’m very particular when it comes to what I fight with,” he said. “Just like you. It might be damaged, but I can still use it. By the way, Fate, do you think I have enough room in here?”
“Enough room for wha—Aaron, you can’t be serious!”
“I’m dead serious. I wanted to save this room so we could investigate it later, but we won’t be able to investigate anything if we’re dead. Get behind me!”

I had no choice. Aaron had made up his mind, and he launched the power built up in his blade directly at the approaching ogres, along with the goblin shaman behind them.
The goblin shaman realized what was happening and sent in the ogres to block the tech-art.
“It’s too late for that!” Aaron shouted. “Grand Cross!”
Aaron had mastered the tech-art over decades of practice, and he was quicker than the ogres. The ground beneath them glowed white, transforming into a pillar of light that burst through the roof above. Because the room was underground, an unbelievable amount of debris rained down around us as the Grand Cross exploded.
“Fate, come with me!” Aaron called as he grabbed me around the waist. Without realizing it, I let loose a decidedly feminine squeal of surprise. However, Aaron ignored my reaction and deftly jumped from rubble to debris as it fell around us. It was *very* cool, and I suddenly understood how the Hart family’s head servant Haru could be so charmed by this old man. However, I didn’t have time to linger on the thought as we burst into the air aboveground.
“The goblin shaman still lives,” Aaron said.
“So it seems. But I’m a little worried…wasn’t Miria fighting on the ground above us?”
“There’s no need to worry. I made sure she wasn’t above us when I launched my attack. Look over there, in that fallen tree to the left.”
I looked down from the sky and saw Miria hiding in the shade of the large tree, looking up at us as she shouted complaints. I couldn’t hear the words, but I had a feeling I knew what she was saying. *I could have died! Were you trying to kill me?! You battle-crazy jerk!* Her complaints were probably directed at me, even though the battle-crazy one was definitely Aaron.
“She’s waving her hand,” Aaron said. “I’m glad to see she’s still got some fight in her.”
“She’s fuming, Aaron. The ground literally exploded under her feet.”
Aaron burst into laughter.
“It’s no laughing matter!” I shouted.
As we hung in the air, I searched and locked onto the goblin shaman’s magical signature. When I found it, I realized it had used an ogre as a shield against the Grand Cross and plummeted to the earth along with the monster’s dead body.
“We’ve got space, which means there’s more room to move. But that goes for them as well as us,” Aaron said. “Let’s do it, Fate!”
“This time for sure,” I shouted.
“Let’s finish this before my sword breaks completely!”
Aaron took my hand and threw me in the direction of the goblin shaman. Then he moved in to fight the remaining ogres. However, he wouldn’t be able to handle them all with his sword in such poor condition, and if my senses were right, at least ten ogres still remained.

I gripped my holy sword tight in hand as I flew toward the goblin shaman. I was heading straight for it, but I had been overly optimistic when I assumed that the monster was helpless. The goblin shaman expected my attack and knew there was no way for either of us to dodge as we plummeted through the air. The monster pointed its staff at me and began to cast a huge fireball.

It has the Fireball spell?!

With Greed, I could have cut it down with the black scythe, but all I had now was a holy sword. In that case, was Grand Cross the best option? If our powers clashed, it would negate both of our attacks. I was about to give up entirely when the goblin shaman was hit by a different Grand Cross attack. It was strong enough to interrupt the monster's spell, but where had it come from? I assumed Aaron had used it until I heard a girl's voice from below.

"Now! Finish it!"

It was Memil, looking up at me. Still in her maid's uniform, she gripped a holy sword in her hands. Ever since she arrived at Barbatos Manor, she had agreed to obey strict rules that forbade her from any holy knight conduct. That included acting with the authority of a holy knight, as well as carrying and using holy swords. Tech-arts were, naturally, completely out of the question. But she'd broken all of those rules in order to save me, knowing she would be punished when the kingdom found out.

I was shocked, but also ashamed of myself for feeling the way I did. Memil was no longer a member of the Vlerick family. She was a Barbatos now, and she was saving a sibling in need of her help. I nodded as I flew toward the goblin shaman.

"This ends now!"

Memil's surprise attack had opened a weakness in the goblin shaman's defenses, and my sword plunged easily through its ribcage, piercing its heart.

The goblin screamed with a voice that sounded unlike that of any living creature, and I covered my ears instinctively. At the same time, a red light poured out of its body. As that light began to fade, I felt my consciousness fade with it.

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When I opened my eyes, I was in a world of white. All around me, the ground stretched out into a horizon of endless white. It was a place I knew all too well. Luna had created it as a kind of dam to block my Gluttonous urges. It was a mental construct I thought of as the spiritual plane. If I was back in this place, it meant that Roxy and I were back in our own bodies.

"But it's not over yet."

I turned to the voice that spoke and found a girl with white hair standing before me. Her near-emotionless features reminded me of Myne.

“Luna!”
“Do you know how tough it was for me to have to deal with this soul-swap thing? Ugh…”
“I…I’m sorry,” I said.
She was talking about my Gluttony’s hunger and how it had rendered Roxy unconscious. Memil had helped keep things from getting out of control, but Luna had played a role behind the scenes too.
“If I weren’t here, Roxy’s soul would have been just another snack for your Gluttony. You owe me big time, now.”
“That sounds kind of terrifying,” I admitted. “Paying Myne back for her favor was a whole ordeal.”
“What do you mean, ordeal?! Paying my sister back is the whole reason I’m here and able to protect you now! I’m glad Myne isn’t here to hear you say that. She’d be so sad. You…you’ll have to work a lot harder yet, you hear?”
Luna berated me in a way that reminded me a lot of her sister.
“Okay, so how do I pay you back, then?” I asked.
“It’s simple. I want you to stop Myne. She’s trying to open the Door to Distant Lands.”
I couldn’t ignore the sincerity in her eyes as she spoke. Myne had said she was looking for the door. It was something she couldn’t let go of—her reason for living.
“Luna, I still don’t know anything at all about the Door. Greed won’t tell me anything either.”
“Greed is always like that. I’m stuck watching from here, but I know. It’s beginning… No. I feel like it might have already begun. I can feel it.”
“It’s not good, is it?”
“Nobody will come away from this happy… Nobody.”
If Luna’s words were true, then why was Myne doing this? I didn’t have a clue. If I wanted to find out, I would just have to ask her myself.
But right now, I had to slay the remaining ogres in the Hobgoblin Forest. Aaron was on his own; even someone as strong as him would struggle against ten ogres. On top of that, I was worried about Roxy, Miria, and Memil. The more I thought about it, the more my worries grew. I had to hurry. Before I left, I gave Luna my thanks.
“Thank you for protecting Roxy, Luna. I’m grateful to you. Let’s talk more about Myne later.”
“Wait a minute!” Luna grabbed my hand. There was an apologetic tilt to her frown. I had never seen her like this before. “By coming here, Roxy might have found out about your current condition…”
“Ah… I see…” All I could manage was a dry chuckle.
But Luna wasn’t done yet. “You told her you wouldn’t lie to her anymore. It’d be nice if you kept that promise. Both for you, and for me…”
I couldn’t bring myself to respond. I didn’t have time to get any deeper into the topic. Perhaps it looked to her like I was running away from the problem, but time was of the essence. I put the spiritual plane behind me.

Chapter 14: Unceasing Black Flames

I WOKE UP TO FIND a worried-looking Sahara and Lady Aisha watching over me. Their faces flooded with relief when I nodded at them.
“You’re back. Thank goodness…” said Lady Aisha.
“My lord!” Sahara leapt toward me as she spoke. She’d been so worried, and she cried as she pressed her head against my chest. I wanted to stay and comfort her, but I had to go.
“It’s all going to be fine,” I said. “But they’re still fighting in the forest.”
I got out of bed, and then I realized what I was wearing. I looked at Lady Aisha and Sahara. “You equipped me for battle already?”
“We did,” said Lady Aisha. “After all, a holy knight must always be ready for battle. I was married to a holy knight, I’ll have you know. We can’t have you lounging around in your pajamas when there’s a battle out there.”
“Thank you.”
“Well, I know you, Fate,” Lady Aisha said with a reassuring grin. “You’re heading back out there, aren’t you?”
There was something about her smile in that moment that filled me with a strange sense of confidence. Perhaps it was indeed because she had once been the wife of a holy knight. Was this how she had seen off her husband, Lord Mason? Except…he’d never returned.
All the same, she believed in me, and I didn’t intend to break her trust. “I am,” I said. “And I’ll bring Roxy back with me. I promise!”
“I like that look in your eyes. Very fitting for a holy knight! Here, take this.”
Lady Aisha took the black sword resting against the bed and held it out. Even though I’d held it just the other day, it felt like reuniting with an old friend. I bid Lady Aisha and Sahara farewell once more and leaped through the bedroom window. It wasn’t the polite way to exit the manor, but this wasn’t the time for proper etiquette.
“Go get them, my lord!”
“Bring everyone back safe!”
The voices faded behind me as I landed in the manor gardens and leaped into the sky with every stat I had. In mere moments, I passed over the Holy Knight District and quickly approached the western gate of the Merchant District.
Gripping the black sword tight in hand, I engaged my Telepathy skill. A familiar, arrogant voice greeted me.
“Finally back, I see,” said Greed.
“Yeah, but…”
“So it’s not over yet?”
“Not yet. But more importantly, isn’t it about time you told me about the Door to Distant Lands?”

“Curious, are you? But it’s still a little too soon for that.”
“Still?! But Luna said that might be the cause for what’s happening here.”
“Damn that girl and her loose tongue. This is exactly why Myne left you behind.”
I landed on the rampart of the western gate. As expected, the road was still deserted. By the next day, things would start returning to normal. I looked out toward the Hobgoblin Forest. Voluminous clouds of debris rose into the air where the battle still raged. It was time to join the fray.
I sent power into my legs and leaped into the air. The bricks beneath my feet cracked and shattered from the sheer force of the jump. I could pay for the repairs later. I was just glad the battle wasn’t taking place within Seifort’s walls. What would Eris say if she returned to a kingdom once again devastated by battle?
“Does Eris really intimidate you that much?” Greed asked.
“Stop reading my mind.”
“You’re one to talk, telepath. Why don’t you fill in the mighty Greed for once? What are Roxy and the others fighting?”
“They’re called ogres. They were born from human corpses. Do you know if they’re like nightwalkers? Are they the sort of monster that has a bad effect on my Gluttony?”
That would make them harder to fight. Even the memory of how painful it had been to eat a nightwalker’s soul filled me with unease.
Greed cackled noisily. “Relax, Fate! They’re monsters born from a different path. They’re like failed creations with unusually high stats.”
“Aaron said they’re at the low end of the Domain of E.”
“If they’re regular ogres, then that’s what I’d expect. But you defeated the Divine Dragon, so for you they’ll be little more than an appetizer.”
“Then I look forward to the feast. I can feel Gluttony’s hunger creeping up within me, even though Memil drank so much of my blood.”
“It’s because Roxy’s soul was in your body. Can’t be helped. Just be glad it didn’t devour her entirely. You know who to thank for that.”
He was referring to Luna, but he didn’t like saying her name. There was something about her that left him ill at ease. However, he still turned up on the spiritual plane every night to help me hone my skills. Putting our souls on the line to fight in such a place had raised my mental resilience. In other words, it was a way for me to improve my resistance to Gluttony.
“If they’ve got stats at the low end of the Domain of E, then it’s a perfect chance for you to put what I’ve been training you for every night into practice. It’s time for you to show me what you’ve learned.”
“And it just so happens that I’m hungry too. It’s been a while since we’ve been able to really feast.”
I burst into the Hobgoblin Forest, weaving quickly between the trees. The roar of battle grew louder as I neared. I drew the black sword from its sheath, leaped over a fallen tree, and sliced through an ogre’s neck. A

familiar metallic voice echoed inside of me as I moved, a sign that I was truly back in my own body.

Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +1.1E(+8), Strength +1.1E(+8), Magic +1.0E(+8), Spirit +1.0E(+8), Agility +1.0E(+8). Skills added: Strength Overload+

Ah, so their stats really are just at the lower boundary, I thought. But they have the Strength Overload+ skill, it seems.
I figured it was an upgrade to the Strength Overload skill that the High Orcs of Galia had, but just to make sure, I Identified it:

Strength Overload+: Quadruples the user's strength for a set period of time. After use, the user's strength stat drops to 20% of its total. Recovery takes one day.

Not only was the skill twice as powerful as the base skill, but the negative aftereffect was halved. It was still a difficult skill to use, but it showed its true worth in the direst circumstances. I had obliterated the Divine Dragon with its sister skill.
I flicked my sword free of ogre blood and approached Roxy and the others.
"Fay!" Roxy said as she ran up and gripped me in a hug.
I took a step back out of her embrace. I had to keep my mind on the battle.
"You're okay..."
"We were worried about you."
"It's time to finish this."
I looked over at Memil, who was injured. Roxy and Miria were trying to look after her while they kept clear of the ogres. Memil had been hurt just before I arrived. "How is she?" I asked.
"It's nothing serious," Roxy replied. "She got hurt trying to protect me. The wound looked awful at first, but it started healing all on its own... I don't understand it."
"We can talk about that afterward. For now, let's focus on the ogres."
I didn't want to discuss Memil's secret without her permission. She *looked* human, but there was something else inside of her, much like my Gluttony. Discussing the monsters within us was not something done lightly.
"How's Aaron?"
"Aaron is..."
I followed Roxy's gaze. Plumes of dirt and dust flew into the air. Along with them, I heard a bellowing laughter. Aaron sounded like he was having a great time. I knew that he'd sensed my magical energy as soon as I arrived. He was plunging his almost completely broken holy sword into the mouth of an ogre as he appeared before me.
"You're late!" he said. "At this rate, I'm going to finish them all by myself."
"How many are left?" I asked.

“Seven—wait. Including the one you just killed and the one I’m finishing off right now, that leaves…five.”
“Never know when to quit, do you?” I snorted.
When I was still in Roxy’s body, Aaron’s sword had been pushed to the limits of its durability. Despite that, he had taken down four ogres while protecting Roxy and the others. Aaron was getting stronger and stronger with every fight, but I wasn’t about to lose to him yet.
“I’m glad you got here when you did,” Aaron said. “That one ogre escaped my grasp and headed straight for Roxy. I heard Memil scream, but I was surrounded, and I couldn’t get to them in time.”
Aaron muttered about how he needed to polish his skills as he forced his blade through an ogre’s skull. Then a pained cry escaped his lips as his sword finally snapped. The metallic crack echoed through the forest.
“Well, that’s it for me,” Aaron said. “Can I leave the rest to you?”
Aaron’s blade had snapped only a few inches above the cross guard, but he put what remained back in his sheath. Then he grinned as he went on.
“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Sometimes you have to get your fill, or you just feel it aching inside of you, right?”
“You know me too well,” I said. “No hiding anything from you.”
“Well, I *am* your father now, so it’s my job to know you. I’ll take care of Roxy and the others. Go for broke!” Aaron patted me on the shoulder and went over to Memil, gently hoisting her onto his shoulder. “Roxy, Miria, we’re heading back to the kingdom now. Fate will take care of the rest.”
“But…I…I still…” Roxy searched for the right words, but she held her tongue and left with the others. I could tell by the ebb of their magical energy that they moved with haste. In less than a few minutes, they had already left the Hobgoblin Forest. It was almost like they were afraid I would annihilate the entire wood.
As the ogres turned to face me, Greed laughed. “Well then, you better give them what they’re clamoring for.”
“Don’t be stupid. This forest is the kingdom’s primary source of water. And I’m technically a holy knight too. I’d be in for a world of hurt if I pulled out all the stops here.”
“I see, I see,” said Greed with a chuckle. “Then let’s give these ogres a world of hurt instead.”
Greed relished the moment, and he transformed himself from the black sword into a black staff.
Oh, come on! I thought. Seriously? Here?
“It’s about time you learned how to use my fourth level already,” he said. “And today you won’t be able to use the mighty Greed in any other way!”
“Greed! Don’t be so selfish! Go back to being a sword!”
“I don’t feel like it.”
I groaned. The fourth level was way too strong. That was why I hadn’t used it when I fought Rafale back in the kingdom. If I had, there was every chance I would have flooded Seifort in a sea of fire. The black staff required

a delicate touch. I felt much more comfortable using it for Twilight Healing than I did deploying it in battle. After all, healing things didn’t involve any destruction, and I didn’t need to worry about control.

“So, the question is…will you kill only the ogres, or will you raze the Hobgoblin Forest to the ground? I’m going to enjoy watching this!”

“Enjoy it all you want. Sit back and watch me go to work!”

“Time for you to brush up on your staff wielding. Can’t have you thinking only about your Gluttony skill!”

I advanced toward the ogres, staff in hand. Five remained. Without the direction of the goblin shaman, they fought as if in a free-for-all. They stared at me, not a hint of intelligence in their eyes, strings of drool dripping from their swollen mouths. They were driven only by their desire to devour human flesh.

Are these the embodiment of a monster’s base instincts?

I didn’t have time to finish my thought. I had to focus on controlling the black staff. Greed forced this handicap on me for a reason: There was another level ahead, and I had to be prepared to handle it. If I had trouble controlling Greed’s fourth level, what would that mean for the fifth?

I started with a small experiment. When one of the ogres attempted to attack me, I easily dodged its blow. As I moved past its swing, I gently tapped it on the stomach with the black staff.

“Graaaaaah!”

The ogre’s stomach glowed as a black flame swallowed it from within. It fell to the ground and rolled around, but the fire refused to go out. These flames were the physical manifestation of a curse. Even when the ogre had roasted alive and burnt to cinders, the flames still smoldered on the ground where the ogre had fallen.

“An inextinguishable flame. Another terrifying power to learn…”

I still had a ways to go before I could properly control it. As the metallic voice told me of my increased stats, I stared ahead at the remaining four ogres.

Chapter 15:
Totally Frozen

THE MONSTERS' ATTACKS were basic. It was just like Aaron said. Orcs were much better sparring partners—they at least provided some challenge.

The ogres didn't fight in any sort of formation and simply attacked at random. They were beasts borne from human corpses, little more than monstrous seeds of evil sown by the goblin shaman. I pitied them, but all the same, they were my enemies now.

Because of Soul Decay, the monsters had lost all reason, all intelligence, and were now creatures devoted only to attacking me. In turn, I cremated them in black flame.

One, two, three down…

"That leaves only you."

The last ogre had no notion of my power, and it had no idea it was being manipulated by my actions. It simply walked toward me without any fear for its own life. My face twisted at the thought of such a creature.

"Ogres…" Greed muttered. "I never imagined that the technology to create them had somehow survived."

It was rare for Greed to open up to me with such information, but one word in particular surprised me.

"Technology?"

"It's Galian military tech. An easy way to convert people into soldiers."

"Soldiers? These monsters?"

"You killed the one who controlled them. They're nothing more than puppets under the control of a puppet master. Just convenient, disposable pawns meant for war."

The idea of using monsters as soldiers was insane. I could barely believe they'd been made from people. It was true that the kingdom's belief in a skill-based hierarchy made life nearly impossible for the forsaken, but even so, people were never used as raw material to *create monsters*.

"That's insane."

"It is. Galian military tech went too far. Exactly as you said: insane."

"Let's clean up this last ogre, then investigate the ruins. We might find something new."

"Time to light another fire, then!"

Aaron had destroyed most of the ancient Galian ruins with his Grand Cross, but from what I saw, it was sturdy architecture. I was sure we could still salvage something.

The last ogre foolishly tried to attack me head-on. I waved the black staff and watched as it screamed, black flames appearing at its head and swiftly covering its entire body. Even so, the ogre continued to attack.

"You stubborn freaking…"

The flames I'd cast weren't strong enough, so I aimed again at the ogre's torso. The ogre's screams grew to a fever pitch before the monster crumbled to ash. The black flames continued to burn. As usual, the metallic voice droned on in my head, informing me of my new stats.

"These black flames just don't go out," I sighed.

"That's because you don't have enough control of them," Greed said. "They can't be extinguished by normal means. It's just like they always say: It's much easier to start a fire than it is to end one."

"Yeah, but I don't really use magic spells. This black staff is hard for me to use."

"It's difficult because you're always relying on the sword. Starting tomorrow, we're getting serious about your black staff training. Prepare yourself."

I groaned. "What happens to the flames if I use this in the spiritual plane?"

"They won't go out, I imagine."

"But that's so dangerous!"

Greed laughed. "If you can't put the fire out, don't forget that Luna created that place. Just ask her to help. With that in mind, expect to be turned into a human fireball tonight. It's probably the best way to learn. Out of the frying pan and into the literal fire."

"Better get ready to join me then. I'm looking forward to seeing you rolling along the floor in a blanket of black flames."

Before I could continue, my vision was stained red. Blood dripped from my right eye.

"You need a break?" Greed asked. "They might not be the toughest monsters around, but you still just devoured the souls of five monsters in the Domain of E ..."

"I'm fine," I said. "I don't have time to just wait around. I—"

"You mean the time you have left?"

"Yeah, thanks to Luna and Memil, it at least feels fine on the surface."

"But the essence of it hasn't changed. It's still steadily eating away at you. And it's gotten faster since you entered the Domain of E."

"You can tell, huh?"

"I am your partner, after all. You still intend to keep this a secret from Roxy?"

"Roxy and I swapped bodies, remember?" I told Greed as we walked toward the Galian research facility. "I think when that happened…she found out what's happening to me."

"Horrible timing."

"She was going to find out one way or another. I wanted a little more time, but perhaps it's better this way."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Once I understand what's happening here, and things have settled down, I'm going to head for the Door to Distant Lands."

"Quicker than originally planned, I see. Did Luna say something to you?"

Greed’s mind was as sharp as his edge. Luna wasn’t the only reason, though—I also needed to talk to Myne, and soon.
“It’s what I want. I have a happy life here, and although I want things to stay the way they are, I can’t stop worrying about Myne. Luna said she’s trying to open the Door. According to her, nobody gets a happy ending if the Door opens completely.”
“So you’re leaving then?”
“Yes. I don’t know what lies ahead, but now I have things I want to protect…so I have to go.”
The restoration of Hausen was going smoothly. Officially, the city was governed by the owners of the estate—the Barbatos family. In truth, however, the citizens of Hausen had elected twelve people to positions of official city management. Of course, Aaron and I still had a significant say in the development of the estate, as well as veto power. However, we never needed to use it, and we largely left the development of the city to the will of the people. We were merely a shield for the forsaken who lived at our estate; we let them determine how their home would be developed.
In an ideal world, all the oppressed forsaken would find a home in Hausen. It was a place where one could lead a different kind of life, one not dictated by the skills one was born with. According to Set—now a recently elected official—the application of Galian technology was going according to plan. It seemed that in the not-too-distant future, my role as a shield for the city would no longer be necessary.
“Aaron’s going to be devastated. You saw how he was when Myne left. If you go too, what will happen to him?”
“I know. It’s only been a short time that we’ve known each other, but we have so many shared memories now.”
Greed laughed. “And you’ve been a holy knight for an even shorter length of time!”
“Don’t laugh. If I leave as the head of the Barbatos family, I’ll probably end up tarnishing the name somehow. I don’t want that on my shoulders. I just want to fight as myself, like you said.”
I thought back to when I had first been attacked by Gluttony’s starvation, when I was no more than a servant at Hart Manor. It had been unlike any kind of hunger I had ever experienced, and at that time, Greed delivered a warning: *When Gluttony learns the taste of a soul, it only ever hungers for more. It will forever urge you to eat, and to feed.*
“*The die has been cast*,” Greed said, echoing his words then.
“It has,” I said. “That feels like so long ago.”
“So we’re going back to the beginning, then.”
I walked back to the gaping hole that Aaron had rent into the ground. The trees around it had been ripped from the earth in a display of his frightening strength.
“Well, shall we?” I asked.
“Let’s do it.”

Just as I was about to drop into the hole, I felt magical energy flaring from the west. It was murderous in intent, and I leaped backward instinctively.
“Huh?!” I stared at what unfolded before me.
The hole I had intended to jump into was now covered by a mountain of ice. It hadn’t fallen from the sky, and it hadn’t come from the ground below either. As if intended to stop me from entering the research lab, the ice mountain covered a space of at least a half mile, freezing the earth solid. It felt very much like a magical spell.
I couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t just frozen on the surface. Even the ground itself had been frozen solid.
“Who…who could do something like this?”
“Whoever it was, I can’t sense them anymore,” said Greed.
The murderous energy I had sensed had vanished as though it were little more than a whisper. I couldn’t follow it. It had come solely to make sure that I couldn’t enter the ruins.
“This isn’t ordinary ice,” I said. “It’s harder than steel.”
Even when I did chip at it, it simply reformed its previous shape as though it were a living creature with Health Regen.
“How about this, then?” I shouted, using the black staff to summon a wall of black flames.
Although the flames melted the icy surface, it regained its shape instantaneously. I could do some damage, but it wasn’t enough to make any progress.
“What is this ice?” I asked.
“If the ice is strong enough to resist the fourth level of one such as myself,” Greed said, “then the person who created it must be one hell of a spellcaster.”
“Yeah, yeah, save your praise for later. What are we going to do? Investigating the ruins is out of the question now.”
“Let it go, Fate. Give it up.”
“What?!”
Whoever had created this obstruction had disappeared, and I had no way of tracing them. Making matters worse, they were powerful enough to equal Greed’s abilities.
“There’s too much I don’t know…” I muttered.
“I think the best thing to do now is to regroup with Aaron and the others.”
“Let’s head back to the kingdom, then.”
I felt frustrated and helpless, and I sent those feelings flying through my fist as I punched the ice with everything I had. A towering fracture ran along the ice mountain, but it sealed almost as quickly as it had been made. An unbreakable wall of ice that would remain frozen no matter what happened… I didn’t like it at all, but I left the Hobgoblin Forest all the same.

Passing through the eerie quiet of the Goblin Grasslands, I stopped when I encountered people busying themselves around the kingdom's southern gate.
I wondered if the merchants had showed up after I took care of the source of the goblin troubles. But no matter how much I thought about it, there was no way they could have showed up so quickly. Even after they knew it was safe, it would take at least a week for trade to return to normal.
What's going on? I wondered. I closed in and squinted to get a better look.
"It's the kingdom's army!" I said. "But wait…that flag, it's…"
The crest on the flags the soldiers carried was the blue rose—the Hart family crest. The soldiers numbered more than a hundred thousand.
Usually, a gathering of this many troops entered through the northern gate into the Military District. Why were they concentrated around the southern gate of the Merchant District? I couldn't understand.
"Greed, do you know what's going on?"
"It can't be…" the sword muttered.
I realized then that the black sword knew something, but Greed refused to speak any further.
The soldiers looked exhausted. As they made their way to the center of the kingdom, I knew that theirs had been a long journey. The townsfolk and local soldiers looked on in confusion as an old woman pushed through the crowd and hugged one of the returning soldiers.
"You're alive! I'm so glad! I…I thought you perished…"
"Mother…" the soldier said. "It's okay. I'm back."
The scene tugged at my heartstrings, and it seemed to kickstart similar scenes all around as family members ran to soldiers they knew. Happiness abounded, but I noticed something similar in the comments that everybody made.
We thought you'd been killed by the Divine Dragon, they said.
The southern gate was quickly filling with more people, chatter, and celebration. I found Aaron in the crowd and walked over to him.
"Fate, I'm glad you're safe," he said.
"Yes, but…what is this?"
"I don't know. I asked Miria and Roxy to take Memil to the manor. Don't worry; her wounds weren't serious."
"I'm glad to hear it."
Once I heard that Memil would be fine, a weight was lifted from my shoulders. Aaron and I stood in silence for a time, watching the soldiers and the townsfolk. Then we noticed Roxy working through the crowd toward us.
"Fay!" she said.
"Roxy! Are you okay?" I asked.
"I'm fine. Memil is safely resting in the manor. But what is all this?"
Roxy said that after taking Memil to the manor, she and Miria had come back to meet with Aaron. However, when she heard all the commotion by

the southern gate, she sent Miria to report to the castle while she came to investigate what was happening.

The situation was baffling. More and more soldiers, all of whom were presumed dead, poured in through the gate. Among the throng, I spotted a group of flags much bigger than the others. Our eyes were drawn to the blue roses emblazoned upon them. A man appeared on a white horse surrounded by the flags, calmly entering through the southern gate.

The man’s entrance left almost everyone speechless. Even Aaron was at a complete loss for words. Of course, I was no different.

“How…?” was all I could muster.

Roxy was the most surprised of all, as the man on the white horse was none other than her own father. Lord Mason had died in battle against the Divine Dragon, and yet he was now here, alive.

I knew I should have been happy, but instead I was filled with an unnameable dread.

Chapter 16:
The Return of the Dead

LORD MASON SAW ROXY and dismounted his horse. He took slow, steady steps toward her. Roxy stood still, watching as he approached. Unlike those who were overjoyed at the sight of their lost loved ones returned alive, Roxy was frozen, speechless.

Lord Mason paused, looking at his daughter, unsure of what to do. I read feelings of doubt in the expression on his face, a sort of melancholy worry that returning home might have been a mistake.

“Roxy,” he said, his voice filled with kindness. “I’m back.”

Lord Mason’s words seemed to thaw his daughter. Ever since his departure, Roxy had worked her hardest to live up to her responsibilities as heir and head of the Hart family. She had been surrounded by holy knights who despised her for siding with the townsfolk. Her newly granted position of power had burdened her with an absurd number of duties. Even as a servant in her household, I had been able to tell that the burden was immense. But I knew that recognizing the weight was nothing compared to shouldering it.

As part of Rafale’s scheme, Roxy had been sent to Galia shortly after her father’s reported death. I would never forget the day she’d left, burying her true feelings as she departed for the land where the once-passive Divine Dragon had turned violent. The day before, I watched her stand before Lord Mason’s gravestone, making what I thought was some kind of pledge. There was so much she had wanted to say that she thought would forever go unheard. Perhaps she had decided to leave those words at his resting place. Roxy and I had that in common. My parents had both passed away while I was young, and I could no longer talk to them, even though there were still things I wanted to ask them.

But here and now, with Lord Mason standing before her, Roxy could now say those things to him. Perhaps because all those thoughts bubbled to the surface, she couldn’t find the right words. She instead replied to him with the tears in her eyes. Lord Mason embraced his daughter in a hug.

“You’ve been through so much,” he said.

Everything that happened next felt like it happened in an instant. Aaron called out to Lord Mason. He recommended going to the castle to report his return. Lord Mason nodded and headed for the castle. Though Roxy tried to follow, he told her not to.

“Father…” Roxy said.

“There’s no need for tears,” Lord Mason said. “After all this time, I thought you would have grown into a real holy knight, but you’re still a child.”

“That’s not it at all!” Roxy protested. “I…I…”

“I’ll be back soon. Wait for me at the manor.” Lord Mason then turned to Aaron and me. “Aaron, thank you for your suggestion. And my apologies for not realizing you had returned to active duty. I can scarcely believe it. And who is this?” He looked in my direction.

“This is Fate Barbatos, my adopted son,” Aaron replied. “I’ll tell you the longer version when we have more time.”

“Indeed. Until then.”

I felt nervous standing before Roxy’s father. I bowed somewhat clumsily to him. He returned my greeting with a warm smile and headed toward the castle. In that instant, I felt that I stood before a man of great valor.

We watched as the soldiers continued, still unable to grasp exactly what we were witnessing. It was impossible that so many soldiers could have miraculously escaped death in Galia. It wasn’t just that, however—the belongings of the fallen soldiers had long ago been returned to their grieving families. This was also true of Lord Mason, whose things were buried in his grave at Hart Manor. Aaron asked Roxy if she could confirm that, but she shook her head.

“I’m too scared…” she said. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do it. I know it’s important, but…I’m sorry.”

“No, I asked you for something I shouldn’t have. It is I who should apologize.”

After a short time, soldiers and holy knights began appearing at the southern gate, having received word from Miria. We left the rest up to them as we returned to the Holy Knight District. Lady Aisha was at Hart Manor, and we needed to inform her as soon as possible that her husband was alive.

“Mother will be so shocked to hear the news,” Roxy said.

“She might jump out of her own skin,” Aaron added.

I watched Aaron and Roxy walking along ahead and put my hand to the black sword at my waist.

“What do you make of this, Greed?”

“It shouldn’t be possible, but it’s happening.”

“Yeah, that much I can see for myself. That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I expected that you would have fit the pieces together already. Just like Luna told you. No happy endings for anyone.”

“Happy endings…so even if things look rosy at the start, in the end they’ll turn tragic?”

“Yep. You saw Roxy earlier. She was a bundle of nerves when she first saw her father, but now look. She couldn’t be happier.”

Perhaps some part of Roxy had always hoped for another chance to see her father. Now she was beginning to accept his return, though some part of her perhaps feared that it wasn’t true. I had to ask Greed if all of this had something to do with Myne and her search.

“Is it the Door to Distant Lands?” I asked.

“And if it is?” Greed asked in return. “What will you do then?”

“Greed!”
“I’m sorry. But there’s still time. No need to get hasty. If things have gone this far, Eris won’t be wasting any time either. She’ll be back, and I’m sure she’ll have updates for us. Your best bet for now is to wait.”
“No choice but to wait…”
I wasn’t good at waiting. Still, there was nothing else to do. Before leaping into action, we needed to see if anyone who came back had any leads. I could rely on the two white knights at the castle to investigate this matter for us, but I wasn’t too good at dealing with either of them. In any case, I knew that if I asked, they would tell me what they knew.
We saw Lady Aisha at the gates as we approached Hart Manor. She’d been waiting there for us since we had returned to our original bodies. As soon as she saw us, she ran to meet us. She had put on an air of confidence earlier, but the truth was that she’d been worried sick for the both of us.
“Ah, you’re both back safe and sound. I’m so glad, I really am. And there’s no need to worry—Memil woke up just a little while ago. Miss Sahara is with her.”
“Thank you, my lady.”
“Ah, it’s so much better that you’re both back to normal! Still, that boyish Roxy was lots of fun. I dare say I’m going to miss her.”
“Mother, please! Show some manners!”
“Oh, my. My apologies, dearest daughter. There’s no need to get so angry. You’ll only give yourself more wrinkles. If you keep that up, you’ll only scare Fate off.”
“Huh?!”
As usual, Lady Aisha was nothing if not full of vigor. It was hard to fathom that she had been completely bedridden until just a few months ago. Now we had to break the news to her. I was a little worried as to how she would take it. Aaron and I watched over Roxy as her face grew serious.
“Mother, I need you to listen to me carefully now, okay?”
“What? What is it? Oh, you don’t mean…? He finally popped the question?”
Lady Aisha looked back and forth at Roxy and me, suddenly brimming with incredible joy and a desire to celebrate. It was clear she had entirely the wrong idea.
Roxy suddenly realized what her mother was thinking. “Not yet, Mother! Not yet! Why do you always assume that’s what we want to talk to you about?!”
“Oh, so that’s not what you wanted to tell me? How very disappointing Well then, what is it? I’m sure it can’t possibly be as exciting as that.”
Lady Aisha seemed suddenly bored now that she knew we wanted to tell her something different. Roxy’s eyebrow twitched irritably at her mother’s attitude. She had something genuinely important to say. It was always like this with these two. Lady Aisha was always playfully pushing Roxy around.
“Mother, I’m serious,” Roxy said, grabbing her mother by the shoulders. “I need you to listen to me.”

Lady Aisha froze, shocked by her daughter’s actions. “Okay, okay. I’m listening. What is it?”
“Father has come back.”
“What?!”
“Father has returned from Galia. He’s back, and he’s alive.”
Lady Aisha clearly couldn’t comprehend the idea that her husband had returned. She was certain he had died. Her wide eyes blinked with disbelief as she looked at her daughter. “If this is your idea of a joke, it’s in very poor taste. Stop it at once. That’s impossible. Mason is gone, and I won’t have you making light of it.”
“But it’s true!”
“Huh?! My, oh my, wh-whatever shall I do? What is going on here? Aaron, please talk some sense for me, would you please?”
Lady Aisha still thought her daughter was playing a trick on her, so she turned to Aaron, who was always trustworthy.
“Aisha, Roxy is speaking the truth. I met Mason myself earlier. He’s currently at the castle.”
“My lord…I never would have thought you’d join in this sort of tomfoolery. You’re lying, you must be lying. I…he…Fate, please, tell me the truth!”
I was her last resort, and she grabbed hold of me in search of an answer. It wasn’t that the idea of Lord Mason being alive bothered her. Rather, it was that this kind of good news was so divorced from reality that she couldn’t comprehend it. Lady Aisha’s response was entirely natural. After all, it was a case of the dead coming back to life.
“Why would you all lie to me about this?” she pleaded. “Mason…Fate, is he… I feel like if he really has come back, I’ll faint on this very spot…”
“My lady, please calm down,” I said. “Take a few deep breaths.”
“Yes, you’re right. Thank you, Fate. I feel a little better.”
“Great. Now it’s my turn to tell you the truth: Lord Mason has returned.”
It seemed that my words were the last straw. Lady Aisha’s eyes rolled back into her head and she fainted, exactly as she said she would. I caught her before she fell. Roxy was shocked; she hadn’t expected this reaction from her mother.
“Mother?!” she cried.
“Let’s take her back to the manor and let her sleep,” Aaron said. “As far back as I can remember, Aisha had completely devoted herself to Mason. She loved him like no other.”
“Ah, I see,” I said. “I’m sorry about this, Roxy.”
“You have nothing to apologize for, Fate. My mother has always been a handful. Come on, let’s head to the manor.”
“Okay.”
With Lady Aisha in my arms, I followed Roxy into Hart Manor.
The head servant Haru dashed up to us. “Lady Aisha! What happened?!”
“She got a little too excited,” Roxy explained, “and it appears she fainted.”
“I’ll get something prepared to help her cool down.”

Haru ran off immediately. The manor buzzed with palpable tension, and Aaron turned to Roxy.
“Mason will be coming here once he’s finished at the castle,” he said. “You had best explain the situation to your staff before he does.”
“You’re right. I’ll gather everyone and give them the news. Will you take care of my mother for me?”
“Of course. Right, Fate?”
“Yes. Roxy, leave your mother to us. We’ll take care of her.”
“Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”
Roxy walked off and started gathering her staff, just as was expected of the head of the family. When they were all together, she shared the news that Lord Mason was coming home. I didn’t expect anyone to react quite like Lady Aisha had, but I was certain they would be astonished. Even when I had worked as a servant at the manor, Lord Mason’s passing had left the staff with a deep well of sadness. I could still remember how, after a few drinks, people had opened up and talked about their memories of him.
I watched as Roxy informed the staff.
“However you look at it, she’s amazing, that Roxy,” said Aaron. “Let’s go, Fate.”
“Of course. However, I’m a little worried. Is it okay for two men to be alone with Lady Aisha in her private quarters?”
“Hmm…you’ve always been a bit uptight when it comes to that kind of thing. In that case…”
Just then, Haru returned with a small bucket of water and a towel.
“Just in time,” Aaron said. “Haru, would you mind showing us the way to Aisha’s room?”
“Right this way,” she replied.
We followed Haru to Lady Aisha’s room. As we did, I could hear Lady Aisha mumbling, calling out Lord Mason’s name.
“He’ll be back soon,” she said softly, a look of relief washing across her face.
All this time, she had held back her true feelings, hiding them behind a veil of jokes and love for her daughter.
Luna’s words played over in my head again. I couldn’t forget them. The Door was opening. That, or it had already opened. Though I still didn’t know what was happening in any real sense, that had to be why Lord Mason had returned, and for that I was happy.
For that brief moment, just like Lady Aisha and Roxy, I allowed myself to enjoy the good news.

Chapter 17:
The Truth About Memil

WE ENTERED LADY AISHA'S ROOM, where I placed her on her bed. Aaron and I were both worried and decided to remain at Hart Manor for a while. About an hour later, Lady Aisha came to.

"I'm…I'm sorry," she said. "I fear I got a little too excited. When you healed me, you gave me too much energy, Fate."

She sat up in bed with a bright smile. It seemed she could finally accept that Lord Mason was alive and back. Aaron looked relieved to see it too.

"I'm sure he'll be shocked to see me in such good health," said Lady Aisha. "He might even faint as I did."

Aaron laughed. "Mason was never astounded by anything. Not for as long as I knew him, anyway!"

"Oh, Aaron!"

Aaron's words reminded me that Lord Mason's return was quite the shock for the entire Hart family. It wouldn't be surprising if Lord Mason felt more astonished than anyone else. Even if he was, he had only displayed concern for Roxy when he came in through the southern gate. It was amazing to consider that he had gone through an experience that surpassed our understanding of the world and yet hadn't shown an ounce of surprise. He was made of different stuff than young holy knights like myself, that much I felt acutely.

Once Aaron had made sure that Lady Aisha was fine, he headed toward the door.

"Fate, it's time for us to go. Aisha, give Mason my regards upon his return."

"There's no need to leave yet, Aaron," said Lady Aisha. "You are most welcome to stay."

"No, we can't. I would not want to interrupt such an important family reunion. I'll be back to visit in a few days."

"I see… Thank you for your kindness, Aaron."

"Think nothing of it. Fate, let's go."

"Yes, Aaron."

A family reunion. The thought made me envious. My own father had died of illness while I was still young. As for my mother, she had died soon after giving birth to me.

Perhaps the miracle that brought Lord Mason back also brought my parents back, I thought, but I was certain it wasn't to be. It was better for me to let go of such silly fantasies. Besides, I had my own family now: Aaron, Memil, and even Sahara. She felt like a sister to me even though she was only a maid of the household. I'd never imagined I would be a part of such a family.

Even so, there's a part of me that…

“Fate.” Aaron put a hand on my shoulder. “We’re leaving.”
He paused as if he had something more to say, but it remained unsaid as he left Lady Aisha’s room.
“Wait for me, Aaron!” I cried. “Lady Aisha, I’ll see you again soon!”
“I’ll be waiting for you,” she said.
I ran after Aaron, past Haru, and I heard voices chattering excitedly in the corridor. It made me glad to think that everyone was looking forward to Lord Mason’s arrival.
I caught up to Aaron and the two of us walked side by side. For a time, he said nothing. Then he stopped in place suddenly and looked directly at me.
“Fate,” he said. “What are you planning?”
He’d seen right through me.
“Recently you haven’t been yourself,” he continued. “Occasionally I catch you with a far-off look, lost in your thoughts. Thoughts of something far from here.”
“I…” I looked at Aaron, his brow knitted in worry. I wasn’t sure what to say.
“Is it about Myne?” he asked. “I’m worried too, but…”
I said nothing.
“As I suspected,” Aaron said. “You’re…you’re going to leave us.”
“Not yet,” I said. “But when I find out where she is, I’m going to find her.”
“I see. Have you told Roxy yet?”
“I have not.”
Aaron rubbed his forehead, unable to disguise the worry in his eyes. “I understand. But when the time comes for you to leave, you *will* tell me. I want to make sure we send you off with a fitting celebration. Am I understood?”
“I understand.”
With that said, Aaron went to Barbatos Manor to check on Memil. I knew he still had more he wanted to say. Aaron had adopted me as his own son and given me the freedom to do whatever I wanted as the head of the Barbatos family. It wouldn’t be right for me to leave without telling him. The least I could do to repay his kindness was to not break my promises.
I decided to have a quick word with Roxy before leaving the manor. It didn’t take long to find her, but she was still in conversation with some of the manor staff. Just like Lady Aisha, they were stunned by the news. The disbelief was clear on their faces. Despite this, Roxy continued to patiently explain the situation.
I waited in a corner for her to finish, but realized it was going to take some time. I wasn’t a member of the family or its staff, and I didn’t want to cause any difficulties for Roxy as she explained things. As I started to leave, Roxy noticed me and gave me an inquisitive look. I waved my hand slightly in reply. It was our way of agreeing we’d see each other tomorrow.
Even after she finished informing the staff, there would still be so much more for Roxy to do. They would have to celebrate Lord Mason’s return. I recalled the party Roxy had held upon her return from Galia. It had been

quite the celebration. Any celebration for Lord Mason would need to be at least as grand. The Barbatos family would also have to ensure that a suitable gift was readied to celebrate his return.
It was strange to be wrapped up in feelings of both joy and uncertainty. I left Hart Manor, but I did not go to Barbatos Manor. Instead, I went to the Military District. I wanted to talk to Laine about what was happening. She had provided immeasurable help when Roxy and I swapped bodies.
The Holy Knight District bustled with nervous energy. It seemed that news of Lord Mason's return—and that of the soldiers who served under him—was spreading. As I navigated through the crowds of people, I found my eyes drawn to a graveyard just by the side of the gate into the Military District. I could have kept walking, but it had been a few months since the incident with Rafale, and the confusion in my heart was finally beginning to clear.
I entered the graveyard. It was not a resting place for fallen holy knights. Instead, it was a graveyard for those who worked for the holy knights—the final repose for those who dedicated their lives to serving the kingdom's most powerful. Because many holy knights abused their positions of power, there was no small number of servants who were killed by their masters. This graveyard was a place to dispose of those bodies without any inconvenient questions.
According to Roxy, this was why the Hart family servants were never buried here. Instead, they were laid to rest on the grounds of the Hart family estate.
"What's on your mind?" said Greed, noticing my detour. "What are we doing in a place like this?"
"I just thought I'd come to…check up on him."
"Ah…I see."
The graves stood quiet and unmoving. I stood before the newest addition to the graveyard and placed a hand upon the cold stone.
"Are you at rest now, Rafale?" I asked.
I felt something like my Gluttony writhing within me. It had devoured his soul, which meant that some remnant of Rafale lived on inside of me. It was not as distinct a presence as Luna's, but beneath the spiritual plane she'd created, Rafale's soul drifted with all the others who had died by my hands. Perhaps this was why, when I said Rafale's name, I felt his agonized soul trapped in the hellscape inside of me…or at least imagined something very much like that.
It was true that Rafale had ruthlessly attempted to destroy the entire kingdom, but his wish had been grounded in a perverse desire for vengeance. In losing his mother, the one person in the world he'd thought of as his ally, some part of Rafale's mind had shattered. That much was clear in the diaries he'd left behind. He could not save his mother—one of the forsaken—and with each passing day, his hatred for the kingdom grew. He, too, despised the skill-centric oligarchy of this kingdom.

But even then, what Rafale was trying to do, it was…
“It was unforgivable.”
The words were spoken as though they came from my own heart. But I knew the owner of the devilish voice that spoke the words.
“Memil,” I said, not needing to turn to look at her. “How do you feel?”
“Thanks to you, I’m doing well. But I must admit that I didn’t expect to see you in this place.”
Memil took a few steps forward and stood beside me. She held a bouquet of flowers, a sympathetic expression on her face. Judging by the well-kept condition of the grave, she visited regularly. Memil had suffered excruciating torments as part of Rafale’s experiments, yet she seemed to harbor no grudge against him.
Here, Memil told me what had sent Rafale down his twisted path. She had previously been questioned by the castle soldiers, so I knew the general details, but I’d never imagined that Memil would tell me herself. There were very few people in this world who wanted to revisit their most traumatic memories.
“When Rafale took me to the mountain city of Tenburn, we found something buried within,” she said.
“The nightwalker source?”
“Yes. It was a red stone, no larger than the palm of your hand.”
“Apparently Shin dispersed those stones across the world. It was a final insurance, easing his return.”
“They called it a Philosopher’s Stone. In the beginning, we discovered it could be used to heal any kind of injury or sickness. I remember the excitement of the Vlerick family researchers, since healing magic doesn’t exist.”
If it were just a stone, I bet that would have been the end of the story, I thought. I bet none of those researchers ever imagined that the stone was alive…
“It was then that Rafale started saying the oddest things,” Memil continued. “He said that the stone whispered to him with a strange voice… I didn’t think too much of it at the time.”
“So even as a stone, he still retained a certain amount of consciousness… Shin probably promised Rafale everything he ever wanted. At least, that’s the impression I got when I met Shin myself.”
After all, Shin had convinced Myne to follow him because he knew how to make use of the Door. It would have been all too easy for Shin to talk his way into Rafale’s good graces; Rafale hadn’t had any distractions and so had been the perfect instrument for Shin’s plans. He’d harbored a deep hatred for the way the kingdom was run and been in a position of great power as the head of the Vlerick family. If he had known of the Domain of E, a power that surpassed the Divine Dragon… I shuddered at the thought.

Aaron's words echoed in my head with an inexorable gravity. *Great power comes with the burden of even greater responsibility.* In that moment, I knew I had to finally settle things with Memil. I could delay it no longer.
"I'm sorry that I killed Rafale, and that I killed Hado too," I said. "But back then, I—"
"I told you once before, Fate. You had no choice. Rafale was plotting to overthrow the kingdom, and Hado did unspeakable things to the forsaken of the kingdom. Besides, I too was responsible for some of the horrible treatment you received…"
"I can't pretend like those things didn't happen. But still, I'm glad you decided to join the Barbatos family."
I smiled at Memil, but I wondered if she understood my meaning. I felt and probably looked very awkward. Memil nodded and placed the bouquet of beautiful white flowers in front of Rafale's grave. She rose to her feet and turned toward me.
"I've heard that Hausen has started a lot of new projects," she said. "I hope they go well."
"Everybody is giving it everything they've got. It won't be long before they don't even need me to protect them."
"But you must, Fate. I'm sure there is still much you can do to help them."
"Memil…"
"That's why I've made up my mind. Rafale is inside of you, my lord. Even now, he sees what you see. So I want you to show him, and me, that there is always another path. Another way."
"Memil…thank you."
For a time, we stood before Rafale's grave, silent. I would come back again in the future. As I walked away from the grave, Memil spoke.
"You must tell her, my lord. There's so much Lady Roxy will never know if you don't. I know your condition as if it were my own because I imbibe your blood, but she's different. I know she's an important person to you, so you must tell her."
"Yes…you're right."
"I've watched you, my lord, ever since you were a gatekeeper for the Vlerick family. She was important to you. We regarded it as a weakness to exploit."
I laughed. "You almost cracked my skull in half, you know."
"I'm so sorry about what we did back then. Then again, if you're into that sort of thing, please let me know. I will happily do it again!"
"If I ever decide that's what I want from life, I'll be sure to let you know."
Memil giggled. "I'm looking forward to it."
It was so strange to think that as we grew closer, my once-painful memories transformed into experiences we could laugh about—just as Aaron had predicted back when he told me that Memil was to join our family. I finally felt like I understood his meaning.

Similarly, there was still time to fix things with Myne. Even if the Door to Distant Lands was something she could not let go of.

Chapter 18:
The Bloodthirsty

MEMIL ACCOMPANIED ME to the Military District. She said she had a check-up scheduled with Laine to follow up on the injuries she had suffered in the battle against the goblin shaman. She had been surprised to find me by Rafale's grave.

"How often do you visit Laine?" I asked.

"About once a week. How about you, my lord?"

"Me? About twice a week."

"Laine says you don't visit often, so I thought perhaps you were only going once a month, but you actually go more than I do."

"Not only that, but her examinations take forever."

"I see. I suppose it must be because your body is even more unique than my own. Actually, I still can't get used to having my blood drawn every time. I don't like needles."

I laughed. "That makes two of us."

It was getting easier for the two of us to relax into regular conversation now that we had cleared the air. It was so different from when Aaron first brought her to the manor—the chasm dividing us had seemed unbridgeable. Talking to Memil like this now, I realized that she wasn't really evil, not in her heart. She'd just ended up rotten because of her upbringing in the Vlerick family.

Still, some sliver of that old Memil remained. At the gate between the Holy Knight District and the Military District, the soldiers pulled Memil aside to do a pat-down. Her eyebrow twitched in annoyance. She clearly didn't care for being touched by unknown soldiers.

"I am a servant of Hart Manor," she said, her tone of voice less like a servant and more like a holy knight. "I don't believe there's any need for this while I'm in the company of the head of the family."

The edge of ice that laced her words reminded me of the past, and a cold sweat trickled down the back of my neck. She gave off an aura of calm and peace while at the manor, but she had been a girl of high standing not so long ago. Still, as long as she was kind and considerate toward the people in and around our family, I didn't feel the need to say anything. After all, it was impossible to be kind to everyone, and in this particular case, she was right, so I stepped between her and the soldiers.

"Memil is dressed as a servant," I explained, "but do not forget that she is also an adopted daughter of the Barbatos family. There will be no more full pat-downs. I take full responsibility for her actions in the Military District."

"But—"

“Did I stutter? As the head of the Barbatos family, I, Fate Barbatos, will take full responsibility for Memil. If that is not good enough for you, then expect me to return with a direct order from Her Majesty, Eris Seifort.”

“Er, no…that won’t be necessary, sir,” said one of the soldiers. “Please, go right ahead.”

I wondered if perhaps I had gone too far, and I internally apologized to the soldiers as we passed through the gate. When the soldiers had faded into the distance and we were well out of earshot, Memil turned to me.

“I never imagined you would do such a thing for me,” she said happily.

“You’re family,” I said. “You’re my little sister.”

“I see. So you didn’t like the idea of your little sister being manhandled by strangers. I see, I see…” Memil stared at me with a crooked smirk. Her stare was almost painfully intense.

“What is it?!” I said, unable to bear her stare any longer.

Memil giggled. “If you were like this for me…then I can’t help but wonder how you would act if the same thing happened to Lady Roxy…” Memil said as she walked. The look on her face made it obvious that she loved watching me squirm. She went on, “Very well… Could you do this for me, my lord? I want you to remember the scene just earlier, as the soldiers were about to do a full pat-down of me.”

“Uh…okay.”

I didn’t know exactly what she was doing, but I figured it was a way to kill time on the way to the research laboratory, so I did as she said.

“Do you have a clear image of it?” Memil asked.

“I do. So? Why am I doing this?”

“It’s simple. All you have to do is just swap me out of the image and replace me with Lady Roxy.”

Before I could think, I did exactly as she said. I was so upset by the image that I coughed and fell to my knees. It was a more potent image than I had expected. I never imagined that it would hit me so hard. Dark, black feelings crawled inside of me.

“Oh, an even greater response than I expected,” said Memil. “By the way, what happens to the soldiers in that scenario?”

“They will be punished—no, *banished*!” I turned on my heels and began walking back toward the soldiers at the gate.

“You’re going too far, my lord!” said Memil, taking my hand. “That’s unnecessary! It was just a thought experiment. There’s no need to make the punishment part real!”

When I saw Memil so flustered before me, I couldn’t stay in character any longer. I burst into laughter, so much so that I had to hold my stomach.

“Huh?!” said Memil. “Were you…tricking me this whole time?”

Her mouth hung open in sheer disbelief. She really thought she’d had me. But I’d dealt with the likes of Greed, Myne, and Eris, who had thousands of years of experience between them. Memil was still just a baby in comparison. She stamped her feet in frustration.

"You'll need to work much harder to trick me yet!" I said as Memil grumbled. "But you're a good girl, and I'm glad my little sister is a good girl."
"Humph! I'm not the good girl you think I am!"
Memil looked annoyed. My reverse trick had gotten her better than I thought. And just as I thought we'd closed that distance between us too. Without warning, Memil dropped a bombshell of a comment.
"Actually, once, when I was drinking your blood, I drank too much. You happened to be very exhausted that day, and by the time I realized it, you'd passed out completely."
"And…?"
"And even when I spoke to you, you didn't budge at all. You were out like a rock."
"What did you do?"
My heart started racing. What had happened to me that night? It's okay, I told myself, Memil's a good girl. She's a good girl. But wait a second, she does have something of a devilish side to her.
It was true that sometimes when Memil took my blood, I fell asleep, and I wouldn't have noticed anything after that because of it. Still, when I woke up, there was never any trace of Memil, and no sign that anything had happened.
Phew, I thought. Okay, okay, we're good.
But then Memil grinned. "You didn't wake up," she said, "so I slept by your side."
"Huh?! Really?!"
"Yes, really. But I woke up before dawn. I'm quite busy, you know, what with all my duties as a maid."
I didn't know what to say.
"There's no need to worry," Memil continued. "We're siblings. No harm done, right? Right."
I couldn't believe what Memil had just said—and how easily she could excuse her behavior. She left me standing there and walked on.
"Wait," I said. "You're joking, right?"
"Oh my, we'd best hurry. Come along, my lord, quickly now!"
"Wait, I need to know more about what you just said. Tell me—I have to know!"
Then Memil hammered in the final nail. "Please rest easy, my lord," she said. "Not a word to Lady Roxy."
"Roxy?!"
"Well, it would be quite embarrassing for the family if anyone found out that you've been sleeping with your little sister. Even I know that."
"That's not the problem at hand!" I wailed. This isn't an issue that's simply settled by keeping secrets from Roxy!

I had nothing to feel guilty about, and besides, there was always the chance that Memil was lying. But I couldn’t deny that it could have happened, either. I felt cornered. Memil put a hand on my shoulder.
“You’re likely aware of it yourself,” she said kindly, “but you simply don’t understand women. You’re too vulnerable. So easy to catch off guard.”
“So easy…to catch…off guard?”
I was well aware that I didn’t have many female friends. Even Greed had said he could count them on his fingers before cackling sharply. But what was she talking about defenses for? Why would I need defenses against women?
“So if you’ll let me, I’d be happy to help you. I am your little sister, after all, so there’s no problem, right? Right.”
“Don’t just ‘right-right’ this! That’s a huge problem!”
“You must be so glad I’m your sister. If I wasn’t, what a mess you’d be in. I’ll have to be careful not to let anything slip in front of Lady Roxy.”
Memil knows how to play her cards. First, she says she won’t tell Roxy, then she lets me know she could let the secret slip at any time…
“Oh, what’s wrong?” asked Memil. “This won’t do at all. You’re sweating.”
Memil took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from my brow, fretting about how I needed to look the part. She was the whole reason I’d broken out into a nervous sweat in the first place! I needed to get away before things got even worse. I saw Laine’s laboratory off in the distance and broke into a sprint.
“I’ll see you at the lab!” I said.
“Oh, I thought we were going together? Why would you leave me like this?”
“Stick around and let my terrifying little sister keep picking on me? I don’t think so.”
“I’m shocked you’d say such cruel things!” Memil said in mock distress.
“I’m going to need a deep bow of apology for that.”
“I don’t want to!”
“My lord! Wait! Wait for me!”
I dashed to the research facility and slipped into the elevator. I pressed the button for the floor of Laine’s personal laboratory, and the elevator doors began to close. I finally felt a little relief. I had escaped Memil for the moment. Her true nature was becoming clearer and clearer.
But just as the elevator doors were about to close, I saw her hand appear between them. “You really tried to ditch me!” she cried. “How horrible! I’ll suck your blood for that!”
I pressed myself flat against the wall of the elevator as a frightened gasp escaped my lips.
“Blood…your blood,” Memil said, her eyes stained red. “I’m going to drink your blood!”
I realized then that she really was in the midst of Blood Lust. She pushed herself into the elevator and the doors finally closed completely. There was nowhere left for me to run. I pushed myself closer against the wall.

“It seems I simply won’t be able to control myself any longer,” Memil said.

“Can’t you do something about it? This really isn’t the place for this.”

“I can’t. And besides, all of this is your fault, my lord…”

The injuries she’d sustained in the battle with the goblin shaman had clearly sapped her strength. I heard Memil’s thirst in her ragged breaths. I would never usually have let her drink my blood in a place like that, but I still owed her for saving Roxy’s life.

I had no choice, so I tilted my head to better reveal my neck. It was the sign Memil had been waiting for, and she bit into my throat. It didn’t hurt. In fact, it felt good. Strange. Even though she was drinking my blood, I felt only waves of comfort. According to Laine, the nightwalker source had the power to subdue its victims into a docile state to take their blood more easily. Because Memil held within her a sliver of this power, her own bloodsucking had the same effect.

I looked up at the panel showing the current floor. When it reached its destination, the elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. On the other side, a woman in a white lab coat with a sleepy expression on her face yawned as she looked at us.

“Can you please save that kind of behavior for when you’re in the privacy of your own home?” Laine asked.

“Laine!” I cried out. “It’s not what you think! It’s Memil! She needed blood! It was urgent!”

“Oh, was it now?” Laine’s tired eyes narrowed, and she pressed the button to close the elevator doors. She hadn’t believed a word I said. “Well, pardon me for interrupting your urgent little party. Come out when you’re done.”

“Laine, wait! Listen to me!”

But the doors had already closed. I felt Memil grin. I was completely powerless to do anything but wait.

Chapter 19:
The Philosopher's Stone

I SIPPED AT THE TEA Laine had prepared in her laboratory. It wasn't bad at all. It seemed she used high-quality tea leaves. However, I drank out of a glass beaker, the exact sort that she definitely used in her experiments. I couldn't help but wonder if she had anything more normal.

"What's wrong?" asked Laine, noticing my expression. "Would you like some more sugar?"

"No, it tastes fine. The problem is the beaker. If you don't have any cups, I can bring some from the family manor. Just ask."

"I don't need them. They'll just get in the way. Beakers are much more convenient—perfect for experiments and perfect for tea."

"What experiments do you use these for, anyway? Actually, it's better if I don't know."

"Yes, let's not get into that."

As long as Laine washed her beakers properly, I had nothing to worry about. I considered this as I took in the laboratory, which was a ramshackle mess as usual. It was almost impossible to find a place to even stand.

Maybe she doesn't wash her beakers after all… I thought.

"Don't look at me like that," Laine said. "I'll have you know I'm at least tidy enough to clean what I use for my guests."

"I see. So you use beakers to serve tea, but at least you make sure to wash them first."

"Of course," said Laine, beaming with pride.

Unfortunately, Memil didn't look nearly as confident as she waited for her blood to be drawn.

"Hurry up!" she whined. "If you're going to take my blood, take it already! If you're not, then don't! Either way, make a decision…"

You could hear her fear of needles in the trembling of her voice. Though she was mostly frustrated because, just as Laine was about to put the needle in, she suddenly remembered something and started talking to me again. Memil had her eyes shut tight, waiting for a pain that never came. When she opened her eyes, the needle was gone. This had happened so many times that Memil couldn't take it any longer.

"But you're so much fun, Memil," said Laine.

"What are you talking about?!"

"See for yourself. When I bring the needle close to you…"

Memil shrieked.

"And then when I move the needle farther away…"

"Stop it! Stop toying with me like that!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. When I see devilish little girls like yourself, I can't help but want to act a little impish myself. Can I do it just a little longer?"

“No! You can’t! My lord, please! Say something!”
I pretended not to hear her. I still hadn’t forgiven her for the elevator incident earlier. I hoped this needle experience would give her a chance to reflect on her actions. It seemed like Laine did this with Memil regularly, anyway.
“I’m so glad you and Laine are such good friends,” I said.
“Friends?! Your sister is in crisis!”
“Ah, nothing like a cup of tea after battle. Really soothes the soul…”
“Are you listening to me, my lord?!”
“Nope.”
“How can you reply if you’re not listening?!”
I was in a state of peace. I knew it was useless to resist Laine’s pursuit of research. The secret to getting along with her was in going with the flow, wherever it went. Laine liked it when you struggled, and that just made things worse. Memil still hadn’t realized that.
When Laine was finally satisfied, she started taking Memil’s blood samples. Memil went completely pale as the needle went into her arm. She loved taking blood from me, but she loathed the idea of anyone taking her own blood. She moaned miserably.
“Are you finished yet?”
“No.”
“What about now? Are we done?”
“Not yet.”
“You’re taking too much. I’ll have to take an equal amount from my lord later…”
Memil shot me a knowing glance. She was so lost in her helplessness that she tried to drag me into the ordeal. She wanted more blood, even though she had already helped herself to a couple pints in the elevator. I shook my head.
“You’re not taking any more today,” I said. “I don’t want to die of blood loss.”
“I lost a *lot* of blood in the battle, you know.”
That was true. In protecting Roxy, Memil had taken an ogre attack head-on. Her heavy wound had healed cleanly thanks to the power of the nightwalker source. However, that healing came at the cost of blood, and lots of it. Memil had never once asked me for blood outside of the manor walls, so it was possible that in the elevator, she had truly been at her limit.
Nonetheless, Laine continued to draw samples of her blood.
“Do you really need that much for your analysis?” Memil asked as Laine filled a fourth vial.
“I need two for the analysis. I need two for my own experiments… Actually, I need one more.”
“Wait just a moment! This is the first I’ve heard of this!”
“Relax, you’ll be fine. It’ll all be over soon.”

Memil shrieked. She'd realized she'd been tricked and struggled to get free. That didn't stop Laine, who ignored Memil's tantrum and continued taking blood. That was just how Laine was when it came to her work. Even her father, Mugan, was concerned by it. He often brought it up when we talked. My examination was up next, and I was getting worried. I prepared myself for the possibility that she'd want the usual five vials of blood. Because I'd lost so much blood already, I wondered if I could persuade her to go easy on me. Considering it was Laine, I quickly gave up those hopes.

"All right, we're all done. I'll send these blood samples out for testing," said Laine.

The now gaunt and pale Memil was finally free. However, she lingered there in her chair, looking completely dazed. *Maybe she gave too much blood?* Laine tried talking to her, but she didn't respond. She decided the best course of action was to take my blood samples in a separate room.

"Take a seat over there," she said as we entered.

"You're going to take a lot of blood again, aren't you?"

"You know the drill, Fate. You're something of a special case compared to Memil."

"You said you were going to use Memil's blood for some experiments. What are you planning?"

"Those experiments are for your sake too, you know. I discovered something interesting."

"Something interesting? What is it? Tell me."

"No. Not until I'm certain. You'll just have to wait for the good news. Now relax, please."

As Laine brought the needle closer to my arm, I let all the power slip from my body and allowed the needle to slide into me. It was the only way to drop the defenses inherent to the Domain of E so Laine could get her samples. The first time she'd tried to take blood samples, my Domain of E level had completely blocked her attempts, and her needles had been unable to pierce my skin. I could only help Laine get the samples she needed if I relaxed completely and welcomed the piercing. The Domain of E was incredibly powerful when it came to battle, but it had its annoying drawbacks when it came to things like Laine's examinations or medical treatments.

"By the way, what does the Domain of E *feel* like?" Laine asked as she took her samples. "Is it painful? Does it hurt? Do you enjoy it? Does it make you feel good? How is it?"

Laine was fascinated by the Domain of E, and she wanted to know everything about it.

"I feel normal," I said. "It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't make me feel good either."

"Your stats are a whole dimension removed from those of regular living creatures. With that in mind, I thought there might be some kind of change in your mental state, but I guess not."

Actually, Laine was half-right. Anyone who crossed into the Domain of E and lost their soul to it suffered Soul Decay, at which point they became something no longer human. In Rafale's case, that transformation resulted in the terrifyingly powerful undead archdemon. When I fought the goblin shaman, it had created ogres by forcing people who weren't ready into the Domain of E. Neither were pleasant outcomes.

"It's just my own opinion," Laine said, "but I think the worst happens when a soul and its stats are too far out of balance, or otherwise dangerously unstable."

"I think you're right," I said. "That was the case with Rafale. And it was the case with the ogres in the Hobgoblin Forest too."

"Ogres? What are those?"

"I was planning to tell you after this examination, but…"

As Laine took my blood, I explained to her what had happened in the battle with the goblin shaman, and the eerie ruins that resembled a facility built with Galian technology. We'd found people who had been reported missing there, all of whom were experimented on. Forced into the Domain of E before our eyes, they had transformed into monsters known as ogres.

"People transforming into monsters… Most fascinating. And what happened to the ruins and the ogres?"

It was clear that Laine wanted to see it all for herself. At times like this, she looked like nothing so much as a child with a precious toy, her eyes sparkling with delight. She would keep asking me until I gave her an answer.

"I couldn't get into the facility. The entrance was blocked off, frozen by some kind of powerful sorcery or something. I left the ogres dead in the forest, so you may still be able to collect their bodies."

"Then I'd like to head out at first light for those bodies. But…I have a favor to ask, Fate."

"You want me to go with you, don't you?"

"You know me too well."

I knew Laine well enough to understand that if I didn't go with her, she'd go by herself. Her father Mugan had asked me to keep an eye on her and make sure she stayed safe. Even if the goblin threat was over, the Hobgoblin Forest remained a dangerous place to travel alone. It practically swarmed with goblins, after all. Laine didn't have any martial talents, so she would be helpless against any monsters she encountered.

"I can't wait!" said Laine.

"Don't get too excited."

"I'm not a child," Laine said, an indignant pout in her words. "Don't forget, I'm older than you."

She drained more of my blood as she hummed happily to herself. In the end, she filled four vials…one fewer than Memil. I wondered if I should be glad. Even four was a lot of blood, and I felt lightheaded and groggy.

"Okay, all done," said Laine. "Let's get on to your check-up."

“Okay…” I said with a sigh.
“Now, please take off your shirt!”
“Huh?!”
“Don’t give me that look. It’s not that bad.”
Laine wanted to check my body to ensure there had been no physical changes to it. She touched me all over in search of anything out of the ordinary.
“No physical changes to worry about,” she said. “The only problem is…”
“My blood?”
“Yes,” Laine said, taking one of the vials in hand. “Your blood is transforming because of Memil. It’s…difficult now to call your blood human.”
“Is it because of the Domain of E?”
“No, it’s not that. Aaron’s blood is completely normal. I think it might be because of your Gluttony skill.”
“And if things continue like they are?”
“I think there will be changes in your body too. If that happens, you won’t be able to keep your human form.”
It was a nice way of saying I’d turn into a monster—and that I was running out of time. Laine was actively searching for a way to slow it down, but so far she had come up empty-handed.
“We still have time,” Laine said, “So don’t give up yet.”
“I won’t. No need to worry about that.”
“But if it’s at all possible, you should try to avoid devouring souls in the Domain of E,” Laine said, clearly worried about the effect of the ogres I’d recently killed. “I know they’re what your Gluttony craves more than anything else, but each feast shortens the time you have left.”
She pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose and gave me a stern look. Whenever she did that, I knew she was being very serious.
I thought back to the blood that had leaked from my right eye when I ate the souls of those ogres. My blood continued to change, and it spilled from my eye when it had nowhere else to go. Just like Greed had said a while back: Skills of Mortal Sin were easiest to see in the eyes. It was likely where the changes would start.
“I’ll do my best,” I said. “I made it this far, didn’t I?”
“By the way, I got a report from the mountain city. They found something interesting.”
“Something related to Rafale?”
“Bingo. The Vlerick family had a mine there, and they found ruins inside. When they searched the ruins, they salvaged a Philosopher’s Stone. It will arrive first thing tomorrow.”
“A Philosopher’s Stone?!”
A Philosopher’s Stone was part of the gestalt organism known as Shin, the nightwalker source. It was an incredibly dangerous artifact, a parasitic

living stone in constant search of a new host. The same sort of stone had clung to Rafale, eventually transforming him into the undead archdemon.
Laine must have seen the worry in my eyes, because she smiled before speaking. “You don’t need to worry. It’s being kept in a specially made case so it can’t connect with people.”
“I see…”
“We’ve handled a lot of dangerous Galian artifacts in the past, so we know to treat them with the utmost caution.”
Laine and I agreed that before I took her to the Hobgoblin Forest the following morning, we would check the results of my blood work and study the Philosopher’s Stone.
A piece of Shin… I thought. If all the pieces are connected, we might be able to pin down where he is…and Myne with him.
I felt a small rush of excitement. Finally, the barest sliver of hope was in our grasp.

Chapter 20:
Those Who Doubt Their Own Return

THE NEXT MORNING, I took a good look around the room I woke up in and was relieved to find that it was my own. I hadn't switched bodies again. It had been hard not to worry after suddenly waking up as Roxy the other day. I knew we'd broken the spell by killing the goblin shaman, but I had been unable to be sure. It was good to be back in my own body again.

"Morning, Greed," I said as I took hold of the black sword.

"Someone's in a good mood."

"Well, I'm happy to be back in my own body, and we might finally have a clue as to Myne's whereabouts."

"The Philosopher's Stone?"

"Yeah. It's a fragment of Shin, right?"

"Those stones are scattered across the world. In the past, people searched for them because of their miraculous healing properties, but you don't see anybody like that anymore. That's where the name of the stones came from originally—those old legends of the past."

It sounded like Shin had been around as long as Greed: at least four thousand years. Greed almost made it sound like they were ancient foes who had battled countless times before.

"I think it's a good idea to use the stone to locate Shin," said Greed. "All the pieces are connected."

"It's scheduled to arrive at Laine's laboratory this morning. With a little analysis, we should be able to find out where Myne is."

"So that's why you seem so chipper."

"Eris found the Philosopher's Stone in the mountain city. We were right to trust her; the results speak for themselves."

"Of course. She does have her uses sometimes."

Eris sent word to Laine saying that she'd sent the stone ahead because it would take time to analyze. Compared to the news of the stone, Laine showed absolutely no interest in knowing that her father was returning home. When I reminded her, she told me in no uncertain terms that she was no longer a child. That was hardly a convincing argument when Mugan always cleaned up her laboratory for her.

"Well," I said to Greed. "Let's get ready to head out."

"Indeed."

Aaron and Memil had already left for the castle together. Memil had used a holy sword and her holy sword skills without permission, so they had to deliver a formal apology. I didn't think she'd done anything wrong, and Aaron was of the same opinion. It wasn't like she'd used her skills for her own personal gain.

While Eris was gone, the kingdom was governed by her two white knights. They were stubborn and fiercely loyal to Eris's word, obeying nobody else. However, it often felt like they saw me as an enemy. The last time I greeted them, they had both ignored me completely. I was still kind of aghast.

Putting my own minor grievances aside, I was certain the white knights would consider Memil's actions generously. If they didn't, I'd talk to Memil about using her former position to pull a few strings.

I finished equipping myself and strapped Greed to my belt. "Good to go."

Just as I was about to leave, there was a knock at the door.

"My lord, are you awake?" Sahara entered the room with a bright and cheerful expression. She looked at me for a moment, then hugged me tight. "I was so worried..."

"I'm sorry, Sahara. Everything's fine now."

"I'm so glad."

Sahara was still young, and what had happened to Roxy and me was simply beyond belief. She'd kept her worry bottled up this whole time. There weren't many people she felt close to. Aaron was always very kind to her, but he came from an entirely different world. As a former holy knight, Memil was no different. It wasn't that Sahara didn't get along with Aaron or Memil, but because of her forsaken background, she felt somewhat distant from them. That's how things were in a world where the strongest skills stood above all. I'd felt exactly the same around Roxy before the true power of my Gluttony awakened. It was hard not to think of her, and people like her, as existing in an entirely different world...a world incredibly remote from my own.

But I had learned something important as I became as strong as the people who once outranked me: In the end, they were no different. Even the Blessed Blade Aaron had his own worries, just like anyone else. He was haunted by his feelings of guilt toward the people and family he had been unable to save. Even with his fearsome power and his strong sense of conviction, it was a problem he hadn't overcome by himself.

Roxy, too, had been hurt terribly by the loss of her father, and as she became aware that her mother didn't have much time left, she grew fearful of what the future might bring. Even Memil had been rendered afraid and uncertain when her brother Rafale betrayed her, leaving her with neither family nor home. I wondered sometimes if skills were just walls between people. I couldn't help but ponder the thought as I tousled Sahara's hair.

"I'm sorry, my lord," she said.

"You don't have to apologize for anything. Let's have breakfast!"

"Okay! Today I've prepared your favorite: sandwiches!"

"Wow!"

"I'm working really hard to make sandwiches that are even better than Lady Roxy's!"

"Well, that is definitely something to look forward to, then."

Roxy made me sandwiches quite often. Sahara, seeing Roxy give them to me, had decided they must be my favorite food. To be fair, since Roxy kept making them, they pretty much were. Sahara and I sat side by side in the dining hall and started eating.

Whoa…what?! This is…amazing!

“Is there chicken in this?” I asked.

“I know you like meat, my lord, so I made teriyaki chicken and lettuce sandwiches.”

“You’re a genius!”

I meant that sincerely. The sandwiches were truly delicious. Sahara had only started cooking when she became a maid. I couldn’t believe she’d gotten so good in just a few months. She had a genuine knack for this—it wasn’t a skill she’d been blessed with, but something completely unique to who she was.

I don’t want to speak ill of Roxy’s sandwiches, but…Sahara’s sandwiches are so… Wait, Fate, Don’t go there. Don’t think that thought!

I couldn’t bring myself to admit that Sahara was capable of better sandwiches. To think all she had done was look at Roxy’s sandwiches and make her own version!

Sahara, flustered by my compliments, shook her head. “No, I’m not very good yet. I’m still just an amateur! I’m still in training!”

“Ah, so someone is teaching you, then? Who is it? Is it one of the nuns at the orphanage?”

I was certain that was where Sahara would have studied the art of sandwich-making, given that she’d grown up there, but that wasn’t the case.

“I’m learning from the barkeep at your favorite tavern, my lord.”

“Wow! Really?”

“Yes. When I asked Aaron if he knew of any places that could teach me cooking, he introduced me to the barkeep. I can learn to make all of your favorite dishes from there.”

I had no idea. Sahara *did* sometimes leave the manor on days she wasn’t helping out at the orphanage. That had to be when she went to the tavern to learn how to cook.

“I go twice a week,” Sahara said, “and I help out around the tavern. Sometimes I even wait on tables!”

My jaw dropped. It was like Sahara was growing up without my noticing. She was completely different from that terrified girl kidnapped by the trafficker and almost sold to Hado Vlerick. She looked so full of confidence now. It made me glad to think that perhaps the experiences she’d been through had made her stronger.

“Sahara, would it be okay for me to visit one time when you’re working at the tavern?”

“Er… Well…”

“Hm? You don’t want me to?”

Sahara’s face went beet red. “I’m still just a novice, and I’ve only just started, so please give me a little more time!”

I was a little saddened. I wanted to see her bustling around tables as the tavern waitress, but I knew she was in good hands with the barkeep. He looked quite tough, so he often gave people the wrong first impression. He had a kind heart, though, even if he liked to push me around. I would never forget the kindness he had showed me, giving me leftovers on the days when I was broke.

“But when the barkeep decides that I’m a good enough cook, I’ll invite you to visit, my lord!”

“Sounds good. I can’t wait.”

Sahara’s sandwiches were delicious, and they were all gone in no time. With a full stomach, I decided it was time to see Laine, who was waiting for me in the Military District. It was also one of the days that Sahara spent helping out around the orphanage, so I offered to walk her there before meeting Laine. Sahara refused. She said she wanted to be able to get around inside the kingdom on her own two feet. There was great resolve in her eyes—it seemed that she was slowly overcoming the trauma of her past.

“All right,” I said. “But put this somewhere people can see it, okay? Promise me.”

“This is the Barbatos family crest…” she said.

“Nobody will try anything if they know you’re connected with a holy knight, especially one from one of the esteemed families.”

“Thank you, my lord!”

I took the badge with the family crest off my equipment and passed it to Sahara. Better for it to protect her instead of me. Sahara took it from my hands happily and placed it on her chest. I watched as she ran out of the manor.

“I’ll see you later, my lord!”

“Take care out there!”

Seeing her recede into the distance filled me with pangs of incredible loneliness. It wouldn’t be long before I’d never see her innocent, carefree smile again.

“Why the long face, Fate?” said Greed. “You know you can always stay here if you want.”

“No, I can’t. But this time, I at least want to do things right before I go.”

I watched Sahara leave, then headed to the Military District. As I did, I noticed a particular man walking in the opposite direction: Lord Mason. He smiled warmly as we approached one another.

“Good morning, my lord,” I said.

“Good morning, Fate. Is Aaron home?”

“Unfortunately not. He’s at the castle.”

“I see. A pity. I suppose I’ll just have to come back again tomorrow.” Lord Mason rubbed his jaw in thought, then looked at me with a grin. “By the way, Fate. Do you have time to spare? I’d like to talk with you.”

“With me?”
“Yes. I’d very much like to chat with the head of the Barbatos family. Are you busy?”
“No, I have time. Let’s talk.”
“Thank you, Fate.”
However, Lord Mason did not go to Hart Manor. Instead, he went to a large park in the Holy Knight District.
“My apologies, Fate,” he said. “If we go back to the manor, we’ll have to deal with Aisha and Roxy.”
“They’re overjoyed to have you back, aren’t they?”
“Yes, so it seems…” he said, though he didn’t seem as enthusiastic as I would have thought.
The park was empty, perhaps because it was so early in the morning. The chirping of birds in the trees were the only sounds.
“Let’s take a seat here,” said Lord Mason as we arrived at a bench.
I was nervous. I didn’t know how to act around Roxy’s father, and Lord Mason saw through me immediately.
“No need to be so tense, Fate. Just be yourself.”
“I’m sorry.”
“No need for apologies either. After all, you’ve done so much to help me.”
“My lord…”
“You protected Roxy from the Divine Dragon after it killed me, correct?”
“That… Well, to be honest, I only did that for myself, and…” I paused as I thought. In the end, it really had been for me. My Gluttony was overwhelming me, and *I’d* looked to *her* for salvation. “I wanted to save her, but in the end it was Roxy who saved me.”
“That’s not how Roxy tells it. She was very excited to tell me all about you. Only good things, of course.”
“Ah, I see…” I said, relaxing a little.
Lord Mason seemed happy to see me a little more at ease. He told me that if I wanted to know more, I should hear it from Roxy. He couldn’t simply share with me the things his daughter told him in confidence.
“But sitting with you here and talking to you, I can see that you are exactly the man Roxy told me of.”
“You mean…in a good way, right?”
“Of course. And you healed the sickness that befell my wife, Aisha. I am beyond grateful.”
Lord Mason stood from the bench and bowed deeply. The gesture caught me completely off guard, and I hurriedly begged Lord Mason to stop. He was a man I admired deeply—a man who gave everything for his people. I didn’t see myself on the same level. I wasn’t the sort of person Lord Mason should ever bow to.
“Before the Divine Dragon turned me to dust with its roar, I had regrets,” he said. “Worries. Would my young daughter be able to follow me as head of the family? What would happen to my wife, bedridden as her body failed

her? But when this strange phenomenon occurred, and when I rushed home, I discovered that I no longer needed to fear. When I realized that, I felt a lightness in my soul, as if it were saved.”
Lord Mason held out a hand toward me. I gripped it in my own, and I felt great warmth in the firm handshake. Lord Mason was alive, of this there was no doubt. But I wasn’t used to being praised like this, and it was hard for me to feel at ease. With my hand still in Mason’s grip, he continued calmly.
“By the way, I heard this from Aisha… Is it true that, yesterday morning, you went into Roxy’s bedroom and pinned both my daughter and my wife? And then you even tried to drag Haru into it all?”
“Huh?!”
“I would like a clear and detailed explanation as to exactly what happened. So, sit down.”
Lord Mason’s expression changed completely. I now beheld the steely face of Lady Aisha’s husband…and Roxy’s father.
Oh, geez, where do I even start?
This was Lady Aisha’s doing, without a doubt. Lord Mason probably still didn’t know that Roxy and I had swapped bodies. Lady Aisha loved playing pranks like this. She’d known this would happen if I met Lord Mason and so fed him *just* the right amount of information. Roxy had probably had so much to tell him that she hadn’t even gotten to the events of yesterday.
Which means this could be…pretty bad…
“Now, tell me clearly. And tell me all of it. How you manhandled my wife and daughter and even tried to pull our head servant into the mess, all in my daughter’s room!” he said, unable to restrain a chuckle.
“It’s all a misunderstanding! You have to listen to me!”
“Oh, you better believe I’ll listen. But my holy sword may answer in my stead, depending on what you say!”
“Eh?!”
Clearing the air was going to take longer than I’d thought. But I still had ten minutes before meeting with Laine, so I sat down on the bench and told Lord Mason all about the soul-swap incident, right from the very beginning.

Chapter 21:
Uninvited Guests

THERE WERE SOME misunderstandings, but eventually I managed to explain to Lord Mason what had happened in Roxy's room. Lord Mason laughed and shook his head. I breathed a sigh of relief now that he knew the truth.

"Ah, I see," he said. "That Aisha is trouble sometimes. She's been playing pranks on me for a very long time."

I wondered if Lady Aisha's love of jokes and pranks stemmed directly from Lord Mason's trusting nature.

"However, magic spells that can swap souls…used by ancient monsters long thought extinct…" said Lord Mason. "What in the world is happening?"

"We still don't know."

We theorized that it had something to do with the Door to Distant Lands—Myne's goal—but I didn't tell Lord Mason about that. It was little more than a hunch. Honestly, I didn't even know what the Door was. If I told Lord Mason about it and he asked, I wouldn't know what to say.

"Perhaps I should be grateful. These strange happenings granted me the chance to return home. But is this for the best? I don't think that all of it is."

"Why not?"

Lord Mason had found a way to return home. I couldn't understand what he meant.

Lord Mason, noting my confusion, continued. "It's because everybody's been taken back to the time before I left."

"Taken back?"

"Indeed. My death left wounds upon the hearts of the Hart family. But they lived on and overcame that grief. Roxy inherited my position as head of the family, and she leads it with great dignity. Aisha found a way to support her. By coming back, things may revert to what they once were, and that frightens me."

"I… But even if that's the case, I'm glad you came back," I said. "Roxy thought she'd never see you again, but here you are. She'd never say it was better if you'd never returned."

"Thank you, Fate. I appreciate your kind words." Lord Mason stood once more and put out a hand. "I would have liked it if Aaron could have been here with us. Come visit the manor soon, Fate. You're always welcome."

"I will. Thank you."

I shook Lord Mason's hand and bid him farewell. As I began to walk toward the Military District, I heard him call out to me.

"The world continues to get stranger, Fate. What do you intend to do about it?"

"When I know what's causing all this, I will leave the kingdom in search of it."

“I see…”
There was a chance that by eliminating the source, I might also eliminate Lord Mason’s new existence. But he said nothing about it. Instead, he simply nodded gravely.
“If you are being considerate of my situation, Fate, there’s no need. I should be dead. I intend to make the most of this miracle for however long it lasts.”
“My lord…”
“What scares me is that these resurrections may continue. They would plunge the world into chaos. If ancient monsters are coming back to life the same way I did, then the situation is much more dire than we realize.”
None of us wanted to consider that possibility. If ancient monsters continued to return, the kingdom was doomed. Those monsters existed in the Domain of E. Just imagining a world in which monsters of equal power to the Divine Dragon roamed free was terrifying.
“As you can likely imagine, it’s no laughing matter, is it, Fate?”
“It might be the exact opposite,” I said.
“At the moment, it’s just a suspicion, but I can *feel* something. Perhaps because I was resurrected myself.”
It was true that Lord Mason’s fears and worries were unproven. And yet, I felt the same way. I needed to get to the Military District to investigate the Philosopher’s Stone as soon as possible. Through that, we would find the evil at the heart of this.
But at that moment, an enormous explosion rocked the kingdom. The sound left my ears ringing. It had come from the Military District. Black smoke billowed from the area, and with it, towering pillars of ice appeared one after the other. They stood higher than the walls that separated the Military District from the Holy Knight District, pointing toward the sky.
“That’s…how is that possible?” I gaped.
“Fate, what are those pillars?” Lord Mason asked.
“Please stay here.”
“I can already tell from your answer that there is nothing I can do. If the man who defeated the Divine Dragon sees danger in those pillars, then I am powerless before them.”
“I’m sorry, my lord…”
“No need for apologies. I will return to the manor. If you need me, I will be ready and waiting.”
Lord Mason headed back to Hart Manor. I broke into a sprint. There was no time to bother going through the gates, so I leaped over the high wall into the Military District.
“The buildings…they’ve been turned to ice.”
“Be on guard, Fate,” muttered Greed.
“Don’t have to tell me twice.”
Several buildings, all at least twenty stories high, had been frozen solid. There was no way to tell if the people inside them still lived. The high-rise buildings in the Military District had been constructed with Galian

technology. Their black walls were made of a unique material that supposedly couldn't be burnt, melted, or frozen. Nonetheless, the buildings I saw had been wholly swallowed by ice.

"It's probably more Galian tech," said Greed. "Something very, very powerful."

"Greed, you really don't have any clue what all this is?"

"If I did, I would have told you when we were attacked in the Hobgoblin Forest. It's freezing everything…which means it could be a weapon like myself, forged according to Galian principles. If so, then it was made after I was."

"I can't sense the source of it."

"We should get to Laine, fast."

The pillars of ice seemed to enshrine the facility where Laine did her research. I dashed toward it, trying to keep calm as I neared. With each step, I passed soldiers and holy knights frozen in ice. They had been taken completely by surprise, turned into ice at the very moment that they sprang into action.

The temperature plummeted as I neared Laine's laboratory. Though spring was around the corner, my breath came out in misty clouds. At least I knew that whoever had done all of this had gone to the same place as I was headed: Laine's lab.

The automatic doors were frozen open, and the guards inside were encased in pillars of ice.

"This is bad," I said.

"There's no time to lose, Fate."

I pulled Greed from his sheath and stepped into the elevator, but it didn't move. The ice had interfered with its systems.

"You'll have to take the emergency stairs."

"On it."

I dashed up the stairs with all the speed my stats would grant me and arrived at Laine's laboratory. Things were worse there than on the first floor. The place was filled with holy knights and soldiers, all of them unmoving, silent, and completely frozen. They must have arrived to deliver the Philosopher's Stone.

"It's freezing here," I said.

It was a cold that pierced through my Domain of E stats. Whoever had come here was therefore also in the Domain of E. I gripped Greed in hand and entered cautiously. The door into Laine's laboratory was frozen shut. There was no other way to get inside, so I cut it open and jumped inside.

"No… How…?"

I recognized the person before my eyes. He held the unconscious Laine in his left hand and a blood-red stone in his right.

I stared. How is this possible? How?
The man stepped toward me, no expression on his face. “It’s been a long time, Fate.”
“Dad…”
“You’ve gotten bigger. This…is just part of the contract.”
It was the face of my father, just as I remembered him when I was a boy. His hair was a little longer, but without a doubt, the face belonged to Dean Graphite. The only difference was the red tattoo that covered the upper half of his face. It clashed with his otherwise kind features.
Even with a sword pointed at him, my father showed no signs of worry. He was calm and collected. By comparison, my hands shook with anxiety.
“What…what is going on?” I demanded.
He did not answer my question. Instead, he spoke with a slow, measured pace. “You’re going to let me leave without making a scene. That is, if you want the girl to remain unharmed.”
“Dad…why?”
Not only was he holding Laine hostage, but I felt paralyzed before him.
My father pulled a black spear from empty space. It was different from the one Shin had wielded. He pointed it toward the wall behind him and swung. Crystals of ice formed on everything and began to crack into pieces. A hole opened in the wall and, still holding onto Laine, he jumped out.
“Damn it… Why are you doing this?!”
I ran to the hole to follow them, but a thick wall of ice suddenly blocked my path. I tried to slice into it with Greed, but it was no use. No matter how much of it I cut away, it continued to grow back.
“Laine!”
“Calm yourself, Fate,” said Greed. “You’re in shock. Your pulse is going crazy. Anyone would panic if their dead father was the source of all of this, but you need to calm down.”
“But…”
“Laine will be fine.”
“How do you know that?”
“Look around. Look at the buildings. The ice pillars are melting.”
It wasn’t happening all at once, but it was true: the ice was changing, sublimating into steam. I heard the voices coming from the hallway. The once frozen soldiers and holy knights were alive.
“He didn’t kill any of them,” Greed said. “He only froze them. If he didn’t kill them, then there’s a good chance that he won’t harm Laine. And you heard what he said. He said it was part of the contract.”
“You mean he’s being forced to do this?”
“It’s a possibility. That’s all I’m saying.”
By the time the ice fully dissipated, my father would be so far away that we’d never be able to track him. He hadn’t released Laine during his escape. Instead, he’d taken her with him. Did that mean his target wasn’t just the Philosopher’s Stone, but Laine as well? What was I supposed to tell

her father? There was nothing else I could do but stand there in Laine’s laboratory, staring at the hole in the wall.

When I’d spoken with Lord Mason, I’d allowed myself to think, What if I could meet my father? What if I could meet my mother?

But the Philosopher’s Stone was a part of Shin. If my father wanted it, then it meant he was either being forced to work for Shin, or…he was a willing accomplice.

“I didn’t sense any enmity in your father,” Greed said, his voice echoing with a rare kindness. “If he wanted to bring you harm, he would have done it back at the Hobgoblin Forest.”

“Yeah… Thanks, Greed. I…I feel a little better.”

“But so much for our big plans.”

Unfortunately, Greed was exactly right. This had all happened because we were looking for Myne and Shin. Not only had we lost our only lead, but Laine had been kidnapped too. I felt the winds of spring flow in through the hole in the wall, suffusing the room with warmth. As I made to leave, I realized that one of Eris’s white knights had arrived. That was quick. Then again, they had been on high alert since Rafale’s attack.

“Fate Barbatos. It is fortunate that I found you. I will need you to accompany me to the castle to explain what happened here. Follow me. Eris will be returning shortly.”

I followed after the white knight silently. I wanted to tell Eris what had happened and figure out what to do next.

Dad… This was not the reunion I wanted.

Chapter 22:
A New Journey Awaits

THE WHITE KNIGHT MARCHED ON in silence toward the castle. There was a heavy, oppressive mood in the air. I didn't like it, so I decided to strike up a conversation.

"When do you expect Eris to return?"

"Very soon. Within the next hour." Strangely, the white knight didn't completely ignore me.

"Wow, that's incredible. How do you know she'll be back by then?"

"I believe you should know the answer to that question."

"I…"

But I actually didn't have a clue. I tilted my head in confusion and the white knight laughed.

"You really don't know anything, do you? Have you not thought to ask Greed about such things?"

"He's kind of twisted in his own way. He won't tell me much of anything."

"It is perhaps fair to say that…I have heard from Lady Eris that Greed's personality is worse than Envy's."

Though I couldn't see the white knight's face through her visor, I felt very much like she felt sympathy for my situation. Naturally, Greed flew into a rage, denying everything she said about him. I could hear him through my Telepathy, going on and on about how rude it was to call him worse than Envy, who was sly, wicked, cunning… The list went on.

The white knight stopped in place and gazed up at the castle, towering above us in the distance.

"Our connection is similar to that which you share with Aaron Barbatos. Although we are further along."

"You mean you share a link with Eris?"

"Yes, though it is a story that goes back a long, long way. I will never forget that we both made a promise to live alongside her."

That meant the kingdom had begun with Eris, Envy, and the two white knights. It was said that when Galia fell, many had been left with nowhere to go. They'd banded together in small villages, and over time built the kingdom. One part of that was due to Eris's Lust skill, which drew people to her.

"However she might seem, Lady Eris is very kind at heart. She made a promise to the bearer of Gluttony who came before you. She led those who were lost, and with them she established our kingdom."

"So, that bearer of Gluttony before me…what sort of a person was he? Greed won't talk to me about it, as you can probably guess. Eris won't tell me a thing either… Even Myne says that she's forgotten!"

Everybody I met had some kind of excuse, some reason to say nothing of it. The white knight saw my troubled expression and sighed.
“That person was our hope. But in the end…I don’t much like to remember it. But there are traces of him in you. Eris sees them too. It’s why sometimes she sees the past in your eyes.”
“What happened between them?”
“When I was young, that man saved us all. Since then, there was nobody else for Lady Eris—only whoever bore the Gluttony skill. This kingdom was originally built to reflect his ideals. However, without him, it did not go according to plan.”
The kingdom of old had been surrounded by powerful monsters. Those who were key to defeating those monsters, and thus pushing forward the kingdom’s development, were those with holy sword skills. As a result, a hierarchy was formed that saw those with powerful skills as inherently just and correct.
But the kingdom wasn’t entirely awful. Even as discrimination flourished, it was still a place where people were protected. For better or worse, when Galia fell and the world changed, the kingdom Eris had created became a haven for the lost.
“It was impossible for us to do everything right,” said the white knight.
But if the kingdom hadn’t existed, and the people had been left with no place to start again… I didn’t know what would have happened to them. The white knight’s words reminded me of what Roxy had said. Because we’re human, we inevitably make mistakes. But if we refuse to even try, we’ll never accomplish anything.
“Things might not have gone well,” I said, “but it’s not over yet. There’s still time to start over.”
The white knight stood in silence, watching me. I wondered if I had said too much.
“I never thought…I never thought you would utter the same words that he did.”
It seemed I’d inadvertently echoed my predecessor again. He’d said something like that to Eris and the two white knights, and he’d been by their sides until the end.
“I think,” said the white knight, “that I understand now why Lady Eris has developed such a strong attachment to you.”
“Actually, those words belong to Roxy. I just borrowed them.”
“But if you accepted those borrowed words and made them yours, they belong to you now. In the same way, Lady Eris, my sister, and I were all changed through our encounter with the former bearer of Gluttony.” The white knight walked on. “Does that mean…you’re his…?” she muttered, the words spilling from her mouth as she was lost in thought.
“Hm?”
“No, that’s not possible,” she said. “Please forget I said anything.”

There was no pushing her on it any further, so I simply followed along silently. I was happy enough that she had opened up to me as much as she had.
When we entered the castle, Aaron and Memil met us. The other white knight was with them.
“Fate! Seems you had your hands full in the Military District again,” said Aaron. “I would have gone to help, but…”
He turned to look at the other white knight, who had presumably ordered him to wait. I thought it strange that Aaron hadn’t come to my aid, and now I knew why.
“I ordered Aaron Barbatos to remain at the castle,” said the white knight. “According to our reports, he did significant damage to the Hobgoblin Forest.”
“Oh, my…not this again…” Aaron looked a little flustered and nervous before the knight. It was perhaps the first time I’d seen him in such a state.
“You are a necessity for the future of our kingdom,” said the white knight. “We cannot afford for you to be too reckless in battle, Aaron.”
“Yes, but…”
For Aaron, who loved battle more than anything else, this was a difficult order to follow. I saw his shoulders slump, dejected, and I stepped over to Memil.
“How did it go?” I asked.
“They were very understanding. I’m just glad they were both willing to listen to reason.”
“That’s great. Especially because they’re always so strict with me.”
“Ah, well, that’s because it’s you, my lord. Isn’t that right, everyone?”
The two knights gave her a confident nod. Then Aaron nodded too!
“I suppose I should nod as well. Yes, I think I will,” said Memil.
“Hey!”
I couldn’t catch a break! I was completely outnumbered. It felt like I was hearing that a lot recently. *Well, that’s because it’s you, Fate,* they said—Roxy, Greed, and even Sahara. Would the list ever end?!
But as I stood there thinking about it, one more person cast their vote.
“I wholeheartedly agree. It’s because it’s you, Fate.”
It had only been a little while, yet it felt like a long time since I’d heard her voice. She walked toward us, her blue hair flowing behind her.
“Eris!”
“Yo. I’m back. Looks like you’ve had your hands full while I’ve been gone. You’re a real troublemaker.”
Eris had finally returned from her expedition to the mountainous city of Tenburn, where Rafale had set up another base camp. She was back earlier than scheduled, but she had left her team in Tenburn and come back to the kingdom alone.
“I felt a bad energy emanating from the kingdom,” Eris said. “I came back as quickly as I could, but I see I was still too late.”

Around me, everybody dropped to their knees to welcome the queen upon her return. I remained standing before the kingdom’s ruler, which angered the two white knights to the point where I could feel it. As I danced around their spears poking at my knees, Eris laughed.
“What’s this? Did you three become friends while I was gone?” she asked.
“Not at all!” shouted the knights.
Their vehement denial left me stunned. I couldn’t believe it! We had finally made a connection by reminiscing about the past. I’d really thought we were friends now. I felt saddened by the thought, but they only glared at me through their visors. Their gazes spoke volumes: *Did you really think it would be that easy?! Don’t get cocky!*
I heard that people became harder to deal with as they got older, and it really did seem true. I wished they’d take a page out of Aaron’s book. Even people who had lived a long time could still be honest and upstanding geezers, just like him! Still, I knew it was useless to even try bringing it up. The white knights’ master Eris had her own eccentricities, not to mention how much trouble she caused. As if to prove it, she leapt toward me and hugged me tight.
“Why the long face?” she asked. “Oh, I know! It’s because you couldn’t stand being so far away from me for so long!”
“Stop it, Eris.”
“Oh, look at you, playing all hard to get!”

“Would you stop it with these delusions already?!”
I pulled Eris off me. Aaron cleared his throat.
“Lady Eris, I apologize, but time truly is of the essence. May I ask that you save this for later?” he asked.
“I suppose I don’t have a choice, do I?”
Aaron’s approach was admirably skillful. He hadn’t asked Eris to stop, he simply requested that she wait for a better time. He seemed to understand how she worked and how to handle her. Unfortunately, it still meant that I would end up in her grasp later.
We moved our discussion to the great hall on the ground floor of the castle. As we began our walk there, Memil tugged at my sleeve.
“I don’t want to get in your way, so I’ll excuse myself and head back to the manor,” she said.
“No, I want you here.”
“Oh. Really?”
“Of course. I want you to know what happens next. Both you and your brother.”
“Fate…”
We all took seats at the huge table in the center of the great hall. I sat with Aaron on my right and Memil on my left. Across from us, Eris took a seat with the white knights on either side of her.
“Well, let’s hear it,” she said.
“Ah, I guess I should start with back when Roxy, Miria, and I investigated the goblin trouble in the Hobgoblin Forest…”
I summarized what had happened for Eris: how we had discovered an ancient monster, the goblin shaman, which had caused the strange goblin behavior; how that monster cast a spell that caused me to swap bodies with Roxy; and how with the help of Aaron, Memil, and Miria, we returned to our original bodies.
“You fought in the Hobgoblin Forest,” Eris said. “And you found Galian ruins underneath, yes?”
“You knew about them?”
“No. If I did, I wouldn’t have simply left them there. The fact that the ruins were buried underground tells me they probably weren’t a simple research lab. I’d love to learn more about it, but we’ve no choice but to leave it for the time being.”
“The ice that blocks the way inside doesn’t melt. The person who put it there…is my father.”
Aaron was first to react to the last three words I spoke. “But you said he was dead. Does that mean…?”
“Yes. It’s probably the same phenomenon that brought back Lord Mason.”
“I see. So he has the power to wield ice. Then the incident in the Military District just now…?”
“Was also my father. He took Laine and the Philosopher’s Stone. I’m…I’m sorry.”

Eris listened in silence. Then she gazed up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. “First ancient monsters that should be extinct return to life. Then people who should be dead start returning along with them. It’s all going faster than I thought. But there’s still time. The Door isn’t completely open.”

“So the Door has the power to resurrect the dead?”

“That’s only a fraction of its power. But it can’t resurrect just anyone.”

“The goblin shaman, Lord Mason, my father… You’re saying there’s a connection?”

“It’s simple. They’re all souls who were tied to this world by their regret.”

The goblin shaman clung to a pure hatred for mankind. Lord Mason was filled with worry for the family he left behind.

And my father… Perhaps he…

When I had left for Galia to follow Roxy, I’d visited the village of my youth. There, I visited my parents’ graves, and I told them what was in my heart. But perhaps that message hadn’t reached my father. His regret was that he had been unable to watch over his young son. It had to be. Right?

To know the truth for certain, I would have to meet him again and ask him myself.

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the conditions of resurrection. “But you said the power to resurrect is only a fraction of the Door’s power. You’re saying it’s capable of more?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t know the full extent of its power. The last time this happened, the door was shut by the previous bearer of the Gluttony skill.”

“The previous bearer of Gluttony…”

“Yes. He gave his life to close it.”

Greed had said something about that once before. He’d said the previous bearer had released everything, then died. Now I finally knew where it had happened: at the Door to Distant Lands.

“You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you?” said Greed.

“I have,” I whispered.

Now that everyone was caught up, we decided to chase after Shin the day after tomorrow. We were sure to find Myne with him, and likely my father… and Laine.

Eris had performed a brief preliminary analysis before sending the Philosopher’s Stone to the kingdom, and as such she had come away with a general area for us to begin our search.

“Are you sure we can trust that analysis?”

“My precious Envy isn’t just a physical weapon; it’s good at control and manipulation too,” Eris said, showing us all the black gunblade. “I used it to interfere with the stone while I analyzed it.”

I gathered they’d put their differences behind them and were on better terms now.

“I wanted to do a more thorough analysis here at the kingdom,” said Eris, “but that’s out of the question now.”

“So where are they?”

“I need you to listen to me carefully. Aaron and Memil, you too.”
If she’s warning us first, where in the world could she be talking about? I thought, feeling nervous uncertainty as I saw the sorrow on Eris’s face.
“Shin is close to…Hausen, and the Barbatos Estate.”
I was speechless. The estate held so much potential. Development had just begun. And now we were being told that the monster Shin was lurking somewhere nearby? To think that what we sought was so close at hand. *Talk about hidden in plain sight.*
“I know how you must feel, Aaron,” said Eris. “I realize that the estate is in danger, but I need you here, protecting the kingdom.”
“But Your Majesty, I can’t just…”
“I know. But what do we do if ogres attack the castle? There will be more changes before this is all over, and it may be more than my white knights can handle on their own. Seifort is the one place people can run to for safe haven, and we must defend it at all costs. You must understand.”
Aaron said nothing. In the past, he’d given everything for the kingdom, and as a result had been barely able to return to his own estate. Because of that, the estate crumbled under the Genesis of Death, a powerful lich lord, and all the people Aaron loved had been taken from him. It was only natural that he wouldn’t want to see the past repeat itself. Aaron’s face contorted into a grimace as he stared at the table in front of him.
“I will go in your place,” said Eris, looking at Aaron with kindness. “I’ve regained much of my power since returning to the kingdom.”
“Lady Eris?! You plan to go yourself?!”
“Indeed. So, Aaron, it is my wish for you to defend the kingdom in my stead.”
The words were spoken like a royal decree, and Aaron could do little more than obey. He had returned to Seifort as a holy knight, and he would follow Eris’s wishes. However, he offered a single suggestion.
“Lady Eris, I have one request. Before you leave, I wish to arrange a duel between myself and my son. I would like for you to be present for the event. May I ask this of you?”
Hearing the word “duel,” I looked at Aaron. He was completely serious. If he wanted a duel, it wouldn’t be something he would engage in lightly. Eris considered the request for some time and eventually nodded.
“Very well. We’ll need somewhere spacious for the event. How about the Goblin Grasslands? We’ll hold it tomorrow morning.”
“Thank you for your kindness and consideration, Your Majesty,” said Aaron. “I assume this works for you, too, Fate?”
“Aaron…”
“However much we speak with words, we are warriors at heart. Adventurers. It is only through the fury of battle that our hearts can truly speak.” He tapped the newly forged holy sword at his waist.
In that moment, I felt that Aaron knew it too—that I would not return to the kingdom again.

Chapter 23:
Farewell, Aaron

I WOKE UP EXHAUSTED. I was set to battle Aaron, but sleep hadn't come easy. For adventurers, rest was of the utmost importance. Battle could arrive at any time and any place. Myne had shown me all too often on our travels that she could sleep almost anywhere. I was a terrible disappointment in comparison. I sat on my bed, dressed in my armor. All that was left now was to clip Greed to my belt and go.

"Well, let's get to it," I muttered.

"Morning! How are you feeling, sunshine?" asked Greed.

"Why do you even bother asking? You already know."

Greed cackled. "Here's some free advice," said the black sword.

"Remember your past, and fight with that ferocity!"

The past… Greed was talking about the time I'd fought purely for the sake of getting stronger. When I faced the Divine Dragon, I'd thrown all caution to the wind and embraced the heart of battle. Now that I had inherited the Barbatos family name and was head of the estate, there were so many people in my life I wanted to protect. Somewhere in my heart, these things pulled me away from fighting as I once had, and I knew that Aaron could see it too.

Aaron knew that if I was heading into a battle unlike anything I had ever known, I could never manage it with anything less than my entire being. I slapped myself lightly on the cheek and set my mind to the task ahead.

"Finally looking switched on, Fate. Don't forget, this could be your last ever duel with Aaron."

"Then I'll give it everything."

Outside my room, the manor was empty. Memil and Sahara had informed me earlier that Aaron was already at the Goblin Grasslands. They had left together when I told them I would be along later, and I imagined they had already arrived at the dueling grounds.

With Greed hanging from my belt, I left the manor. At the manor gates, I found Roxy, leaning against the wall and staring up at the sky. When she noticed me, she smiled and waved.

"Good morning! You've got quite the day ahead of you," she said.

"Yeah. I think Eris alerted the entire kingdom." I replied. The woman was crazy. She very literally had told the whole kingdom about it. "She's acting like it's some kind of spectacle."

"Surely there's a noble reason behind her actions."

"Yeah, I think she just did it because she thinks it'll be fun."

"Fate! Show some respect for our queen, please!"

With Roxy a little annoyed, we left the Holy Knight District. When we entered the Merchant District, it was like a festival. All the shops and stalls

that had previously been closed because of the goblins were now open, and customers bustled every which way. People in the main district square were taking and making bets on the outcome of the duel.
“Aaron is a strong favorite,” said Roxy.
“Wait a second. Those gamblers aren’t sanctioned. That’s not legal. I should go and put a stop to it.”
“Fate, sometimes the townspeople need to blow off some steam. Think about it. They’ve been through so much.”
First Rafale had tried to overthrow the kingdom. Then goblins had thrown people’s regular way of life into chaos. And for better or worse, Lord Mason had returned with his army. I could see how life was only growing more and more uncertain for the townsfolk. But with the return of those once thought lost, there was a new energy pulsing through the kingdom. Even if their return was a sign of dire things to come, I was happy for it…for now, at least.
“Then I’ll give them a match worth celebrating,” I said.
“That’s the spirit! I’m going to be watching eagerly from the sidelines. Mother and Father arrived here earlier too. They can’t wait.”
“Oh. That’s…that’s great.”
I tried to look brave and confident, but the idea of fighting in front of a huge crowd was making me nervous. I could already hear my heart pounding in my ears.
“Fate!” came a voice from behind me. “Good luck out there. Give it your best.”
“Mugan!”
Mugan had arrived back at the castle not long after my meeting with Eris. I’d already told him that my resurrected father had kidnapped Laine. I’d half-expected him to explode into a berserk rage, but he didn’t blame me at all for what happened.
“Like I told you yesterday,” he said, “I was the one who suggested that Laine should analyze the Philosopher’s Stone in the first place. The responsibility for what happened is mine. Don’t act like such a mope. Not when you’ve got a duel like this ahead of you.”
“Still, I’m sorry, Mugan… I promise you, I will find my father, and I *will* bring Laine home.”
“Your father… It’s hard for me to believe he’d be the type to do true evil. He must have his reasons. I believe in you, Fate, and I’ll be here waiting.”
“Thank you, Mugan.”
Roxy nodded as she listened. I’d filled her in on the situation as well. Mugan had forgiven me, but just as our conversation was wrapping up, a familiar nuisance appeared.
“You’re going way too easy on him, Mugan! You shouldn’t let him off the hook!” Miria yelled.
“I said it was fine, so it’s fine! You stay out of it!”

Miria was as boisterous as ever. Fortunately, she didn’t have her magic sword with her this time. It had been damaged in the battle with the ogres and was still being repaired, so I could at least relax knowing she wouldn’t suddenly spring an attack on me. What a pity. She was quite cute when she wasn’t trying to kill me.

“Fate!” cried Miria. “You’re thinking weird things about me, aren’t you?! I can see it!”

“I am not! I was just thinking it’s nice to see you a little less keyed up than usual. And that you’re cute when you don’t have your magic sword.”

“Huh?! Don’t act all friendly just because we fought together that one time!”

“We couldn’t have won without you, Miria. Really. You have my thanks.”

“I thought I just told you to stop doing that!”

Miria’s face flushed red, and she ran off into the crowd. She wasn’t used to receiving compliments, so she ran away whenever I said something remotely nice. I thought of going after her, but Roxy, who had remained strangely taciturn this whole time, suddenly blocked my way.

“Fate, may I ask you something?”

“Uh…yes…?”

“When we swapped bodies, what happened between you and Miria?”

“Er, well…”

Miria had told me of her past, but that felt like a secret she had entrusted to me. Perhaps Roxy knew about it all, but still, I didn’t want to betray Miria’s confidence—I didn’t want to be the sort of person that did that. Seeing no other options, I ran away.

“Fay! Wait! Did you two do something inappropriate?”

“Of course not! I can promise you there was nothing like that!”

“Then why are you running?!” Roxy chased after me.

From behind her, Mugan yelled, “I finally return to the kingdom only to find that nothing has changed! Young people today… So unruly.”

Roxy grabbed me by the collar when I reached the Goblin Grasslands. If I had really intended to escape, she wouldn’t have been able to touch me. I slowed down, overwhelmed by the sight of the gathering crowd.

“This is incredible. So many people…” I muttered.

“More than I expected,” said Roxy. “Oh, look over there!”

She pointed to the huge, majestic stands that had been built. Eris and her white knights lounged upon them with magnificent poise.

“Ugh, she’s putting on such high-and-mighty royal airs…” I said.

“She really *is* royalty, you know.”

I noticed Aaron standing a short distance away from the stands, quietly awaiting the beginning of our duel. Even from where I stood, I felt the strength of will he radiated, and I was almost overwhelmed by the pressure of it.

Roxy, sensing that the battle had already begun, took a few steps away from me. “Give it your best, Fay,” she said. “I’ll be cheering for you over there.”

“Thanks…”
She ran off. Behind her, I saw Lord Mason, Lady Aisha, Memil, and Sahara, along with Mugan and Miria. Even the barkeep from my local tavern sat with them. He had probably pulled some strings with a certain member of the Hart family to snag himself a good seat. He waved at me, bottle of wine in hand, as if telling me “Win, and we’ll celebrate with a bottle of the good stuff!”
“Let’s not keep everyone waiting, Greed!”
“To battle!”
I strode toward Aaron, who stood silently with his eyes closed, focusing his spirit. When I got closer, he opened his eyes slowly.
“So, you’re finally here, Fate.”
“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m ready when you are.”
“Then let’s get straight to it,” he said, and turned to Eris. “Your Majesty, if you could please signal the start of the duel!”
Eris rose from her grand throne. Her booming voice echoed through the crowd.
“We are here to bear witness to a duel between two holy knights. The match will last until one competitor yields or can otherwise no longer fight. You, the competitors, are thusly warned: Do not allow your battle to spill into the crowds. Doing so will result in a severe penalty. Am I understood?”
She spoke with perfect oration for such a public event. Aaron and I knelt before her.
“Yes, my queen!” we said.
As for the battlefield, we had the whole Goblin Grasslands before us. Even so, I wanted to stay at least five hundred yards away from the crowd. When two people in the Domain of E clashed, the shock waves were something else.
“Competitors,” shouted Eris, “let the duel begin!”
As the crowd roared, we both shifted into combat stance in the center of the Goblin Grasslands. Aaron unsheathed his holy sword, and I did the same with Greed.
“Fate! If you won’t come to me, then I will bring the battle to you!”
Aaron’s blade pulsed with holy light. He was charging it with the holy sword tech-art Grand Cross, enhancing both its strength and durability. On its own, his holy sword couldn’t stand up to Greed’s blade, so he needed to reinforce it with his skills.
But I wasn’t about to back down. I followed the arc of the holy sword as it approached and swung Greed to meet it directly. The swords clashed with the loud clang of blade against blade, and a shock wave burst out around us. The grass at our feet went flying into the crowd.
“Is this the best you’ve got, Fate?”
“I’m just getting started!”
“Show me!”

I put my power into the blade and pushed Aaron's holy sword backward, only to suddenly feel a shock to the side of my head. Through my dazed vision, I saw Aaron's left leg raised in the air. The kick sent me skidding along the ground as swiftly as a bullet fired from Envy's gunblade.

This is bad, I thought. I'm going to crash into the audience!

I plunged Greed into the ground to slow myself, then noticed a black shadow quickly closing in. Contorting my body at the last possible moment, I narrowly avoided Aaron's blade as it plunged from above.

"How about this?!"

Without any hesitation, Aaron's holy sword slashed toward me from the side.

"Gah!"

I grunted as I blocked the attack, but I was caught flat-footed. This time, the blow sent me flying in the opposite direction.

"What the hell are you doing, Fate?!" Greed shouted. "What is going on in that head of yours?!"

"It's nothing."

"He's still coming!"

Aaron moved faster than I'd ever seen him. He fought at the very peak of what his Domain of E stats allowed. His combination attack was so fast it seemed like he held two swords. Though I managed to deflect some of his swings, the power behind his last strike opened craters in the ground beneath my feet. The sheer force sent earthen debris flying into the air.

I knew I was never going to find an opening as long as he controlled the pace of battle, so I waited for the tiniest pause between Aaron's strikes and countered. But Aaron saw it coming.

"Your movements are simple. One note. You're no better than an ogre. Focus, Fate!"

"I *am* focusing!"

"No. You're not. You may think you are, but your blade tells no lies. I'm disappointed."

I gritted my teeth. Aaron's words angered me because they echoed my own feelings.

"It's your father, isn't it, Fate?"

I said nothing, but Aaron could feel the truth in the clashing of our swords.

"I knew it," said Aaron. "You speak of going into battle, but in your heart, you don't want to fight."

"I—"

"Do you think you can solve things by talking with him?"

The Domain of E required careful stat control. To fight my father, could I maintain that control?

"You are afraid."

"I..."

Aaron was right. I was afraid. And Greed was right. You have to remember the past...lose yourself to the battle.

I wasn't scared because my opponent was strong. I was scared by something far more terrifying. Aaron knew this terror all too well—his heart had despaired once before, when his family was stolen from him by the Genesis of Death, the lich lord who infested his home with corpses. In Aaron's attempts to release his loved ones, they had been used as puppets to torment him. Though he'd known they were dead, he had been unable to raise his sword against them. He was the Blessed Blade, and yet even he, a legendary hero, had been powerless. In truth, it was *because* he was a hero at heart that he hadn't raised his sword.

"It will be hard," Aaron said. "It was hard for me. If your father becomes your foe, it will be even more difficult. This you cannot avoid. But you gave me the power to stand again when I was in the depths of despair."

"Aaron…"

"For this reason, I want you to stop your father. No, not want… Fate, you *must* stop him."

"But I…"

My heart was torn. My control over my stats was slipping. Greed was overwhelmed, pushed back by the force of Aaron's holy sword.

"Through this battle, you will remember, Fate. The time we first met, your bladework was nothing like it is now. It was like you'd learned to fight from goblins."

"I was so dismayed when you said that…"

"You have come a long, long way since then. I am proud of you. Isn't it time you believed in yourself too? Back then, when we fought the Genesis of Death, you gave me the power to confront it, and to confront my own family… And now I will return the favor!"

I felt Aaron's magical energy surge. At the same time, his holy sword lit up as it were growing in strength. Then he twisted his wrists as if unlocking a door and unleashed his power.

"Can you stand before this, Fate?"

"This is—"

I thought it was the Grand Cross, but I was completely wrong. It had never occurred to me that he would use the modified tech-art: the Eternal Grand Cross. It was a close-range tech-art with a low success rate. Now that Aaron was in the Domain of E, the success rate had risen dramatically.

Four huge crosses of light surrounded me. I tried to escape, but it was too late. Holy light began to circulate through the four illuminated crosses.

"Looks like you weren't expecting me to use this. I suppose I couldn't use it on the ogres because it can only target a single enemy. Well, what will you do now, Fate?"

I loosed an anguished cry. Every movement trapped me in the endless torment of the attack. As long as I was trapped in the tech-art, I would continue to take damage as if I were being attacked by the Grand Cross. I knew how fearsome this attack was because I had used it before in the battle against the Divine Dragon.

A cheer erupted from the crowd watching our battle. They were all in awe of the Blessed Blade’s attack, a tech-art they had never seen before. I was trapped, helpless, and I heard Greed howl at me.

“Concentrate, you fool! Focus on the battle! Is this what you want? To throw away everything Aaron has done for you?!”

Greed was right. Aaron had gone to great lengths to teach me this lesson. Ours was not an ordinary duel. I owed it to Aaron to respond with all I had.

“Greed,” I muttered. “I’m sorry. Somewhere in my heart, I wanted these peaceful days to go on forever. That’s why I was frightened when my father appeared. I never imagined I would have to fight him. I know I helped Aaron do something similar in the past, but can I do it myself?”

“You can give him the answer he deserves.”

I no longer felt the pain of the Eternal Grand Cross. I had unleashed half of my Gluttony, and in my half-starved state, my control over my Domain of E stats had risen dramatically. Not only could I read the flow of magical energy, but I could also make full use of my stats, rendering Aaron’s prison of holy light meaningless. With just my strength alone, I pushed against the powerful crosses of holy light. My magical energy collided with them, pouring into the space where the tech-art was weakest. The crosses began to fracture and break, then shattered completely.

Once I was free, I charged. “Aaron!” I shouted.

“Fate!”

We cried out in unison as our swords clashed, holy sword against black blade. Light burst from Aaron’s weapon, dancing in the sky as our swords collided.

Chapter 24:
Roxy's Resolve

Aaron and I fell to the ground, our breathing ragged with exhaustion. For me, it was because I'd forced my half-starved state back under my control. For Aaron, he was at the limits of his magical power because he'd maintained the Eternal Grand Cross for so long.

Eris suddenly jumped to her feet and began to clap. Roxy began applauding, along with all those who had watched us with bated breath alongside her.

Aaron and I climbed to our feet, enveloped in the cheering of the crowd. Then Aaron took my right hand and raised it toward the sky.

"I yield," he said.

At the sound of his voice, and the declaration of a victor, the crowd exploded into bigger cheers. I turned to Aaron to thank him for the duel, but he'd collapsed back into sitting on the ground. He'd pushed himself beyond his limits; the modified tech-art had taken its toll. I wiped away the blood from my right eye with my sleeve, then reached my hand out toward him.

"Aaron," I said. "Let me help you up."

"Many thanks, Fate." Aaron grinned as he pulled himself once more to his feet and ruffled my hair. "You've gotten stronger," he said. "Actually, you've always been strong, ever since we first met. But now your heart has caught up with your body, and you've grown stronger once again. I don't know if I can keep up with you anymore."

"I'm certain you'll find a way. I don't have nearly as much experience as you do."

"It's just experience. Live and it is yours, whether you want it or not. But experience alone won't get you to your destination. We equate experience with worth, but it's not as important as we believe."

Aaron turned to the still cheering crowd.

"I hereby grant the title of the Blessed Blade to Fate, for this battle is his. No one who witnessed this duel can object. And so I shall entrust the future to the new Blessed Blade."

"Aaron…I'm not…I…"

I didn't have very much time left. There wasn't much of a future to entrust to me. The Gluttony was already transforming my body, and there was no way to stop it. Before long, I would lose myself to it. I didn't think I would make it back to the kingdom after I left. I wanted to tell Aaron, but his voice rose into a shout.

"You will return!" he said, and there was nothing else I could say. Aaron's eyes looked at me with a clear honesty. "Even if the way forward feels impossible. Even if it *is* impossible. You will return! I will believe in you, and I will wait for you."

I stayed silent.

“Never forget,” said Aaron, “that there will always be a home for you here.”
No matter how far I went, or how lost I became…I would always have this place to come back to. I felt as though Aaron was empowering me with his own courage and bravery, just as usual.
“You always go too far, Aaron. Setting up this duel…”
“If I didn’t go this far, it would be too easy for your convictions to falter. I took it to this extent because my son causes me no end of trouble. Well then, Fate? I’m still waiting for you to say it.”
“I…I will return, I promise you. I will come back to this place!”
“Yes, and I’ll be waiting for you, my son.”
This was Aaron’s way of saying goodbye. Even though he had once told me that real men don’t cry, I saw the tears in his eyes. Tears welled up in my own eyes as well. I didn’t need to gild my words so long as I spoke the truth. I wanted to tell him one more thing, from the bottom of my heart:
“Aaron, thank you so much. For everything.”
“Go. You are Fate Barbatos, the new Blessed Blade.”
We looked in each other’s eyes, shook hands, and nodded. No more words were necessary, for we spoke through our swords. It was here, among the cheering voices of the crowds of Seifort, that my duel with Aaron Barbatos came to a close.

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In the early morning, the sun showed its radiant face from the east. It was the day I had promised to depart with Eris. I went to our meeting place, the Goblin Grasslands, with Memil by my side.
“You’re really coming with me?” I asked Memil.
“Of course I am. I already told you, didn’t I? I’m going to watch over you until the end.”
“Can you not say that? ‘Until the end’? It sounds really ominous.”
Memil giggled. “I suppose it does, doesn’t it? Still, that was Aaron’s edict, after all.”
Aaron had sent Memil to join me in his stead. She seemed happy about it, but in truth the road ahead was paved with conflict. I worried that perhaps she had lost sight of that fact.
“I am also here to look after the party’s needs while we travel. It will certainly benefit Eris to have me along for the ride too.”
“I have a feeling that’s why she gave you permission to join us, if I’m being honest.”
Memil’s duty was to provide support on our way to Hausen, and afterward. Tracking down Shin was sure to bring danger with it. With that in mind, if we were bringing any servants along with us, they needed to know how to fight.
“I can’t wait!” said Memil. “It’s like taking a vacation!”
“Hey. Don’t forget: We’re not tourists!”

“Yes, yes, I know. But I still haven’t seen Hausen with my own eyes. I’ve heard that it’s a pilot program for cities running on the power of magitech.”

“I want to build a place where people can live without having to rely on skills. To that end, we’ve implemented a lot of Galian tech.”

“I see, I see. Oh, I just can’t wait!” Memil cried happily. “It really *is* like going on vacation!”

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

It was useless even trying to get through to her, so we walked on. I thought back to all the people we’d thanked before leaving—all the people who’d helped me get to this point. Aaron hadn’t had much more to say since the battle, but that was just like him. Sahara had been a little more trouble. She had clung to me tightly, face full of tears as she begged me not to leave. She had only let go when Aaron told her to, after which I gave her a gentle pat on the head like always, then left.

After leaving Barbatos Manor, we stopped by Hart Manor. I let Lord Mason and Lady Aisha know I was leaving, and we shared a sad goodbye. I also looked for Roxy, but she was absent. When I asked Lord Mason and Lady Aisha about it, they said that they hadn’t seen her since last night.

On that night, there was a small going-away party at my regular tavern. I’d been a regular even before my Gluttony had awakened, and the barkeep surprised me by organizing the party on short notice. Mugan and Miria were there, along with all the soldiers I’d fought alongside in Galia. The tavern was really bustling. Only Roxy seemed lost in her own thoughts, her mind distracted. I’d wanted to go over and talk to her, but by the time I had the chance, she was gone.

I began to worry. What if Roxy never went back to the manor that night?

I didn’t want to keep Eris waiting, but I decided it was okay to be a little late in this case. While I thought about it, a figure caught my eye. It was a young woman with beautiful golden hair, waiting by the gate out of the Merchant District. When the girl noticed me, she slowly strode toward us.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked. “Do you like it?”

“Roxy… Your outfit, it’s…”

She was stunning. Gone was the light armor she wore as a holy knight. In its place, she was dressed in the style of a traveling swordswoman. The outfit was mainly white with a few blue accents, as if alluding to her holy knight status.

“It looks incredible. It totally suits you.”
“Thank you! I’m…I’m glad you like it.”
Then Roxy joined us as we walked toward the Goblin Grasslands.
Huh? Wait a second…
I stopped, perplexed by her actions. Roxy faced me, her face full of determination.
“I am no longer the head of the Hart family,” she said. “I gave the position back to my father. I have decided to go with you, Fay. Not as a holy knight, but as myself, Roxy Hart.”
Are you sure? It’s too dangerous… Those were the thoughts that crossed my mind, words I simply couldn’t bring myself to utter. I felt her deadly seriousness, and I knew there would be no changing her mind. I was powerless against her resolve.
“Well, come on,” said Roxy. “Let’s go!”
“Yeah. Let’s go…together,” I said.
Memil watched us without saying a word, a bright smile on her face.
Roxy explained that she hadn’t wanted me to hear of her decision from anyone else, so she made sure her mother and father stayed quiet about it. At least now I knew why they’d acted so awkward and stiff when I met them earlier to say goodbye.
The three of us passed through the western gate and entered the Goblin Grasslands. We made for quite the strange party of travelers. To my right was a former Vlerick family holy knight: Memil. To my left was yet another former holy knight, now that Roxy had renounced her position and returned it to her father. When I had returned to Seifort, I never imagined that I would leave it quite like this. It made me laugh just thinking about it.
“What are you giggling about, Fay?”
“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s nothing.”
Roxy kept on asking me because she wanted to know, but it was so silly that I kept telling her it wasn’t worth it. Then Memil dropped another bombshell.
“Hm? Oh, dear me. Were you thinking naughty thoughts because you’ll be in the company of three women?!”
“What?” exclaimed Roxy. “Fay! Why in the world would you think such things?!”
How could Memil say something like that when all that awaited us was battle?! Her overactive imagination was going to land me in all sorts of hot water.
Then again, I thought, I really am outnumbered by women…
“What about me? I’m here too,” muttered Greed as I scolded myself for my wandering thoughts.
“You’re a sword,” I said. “You’re an object.”
“How could you say that about the mighty sword, Greed?!”
While I was dealing with Greed’s smug pride, Roxy and Memil continued to speculate on Memil’s previous statement. They teased me about it all the way to the edge of the grasslands, where we saw Eris.

Huh. Now what are those?

Eris stood beside two black objects. I had a feeling I'd seen one of those things before. I thought back and remembered that it was the motorcycle I'd seen in the Military District. They were two-wheeled vehicles people once used in Galia, powered by the rider's magical energy. According to Greed, they were a hundred times better than any horse. Just looking at them filled me with excitement. I had wanted to ride one ever since I saw it, but I never had the chance. Now there was one right in front of me.

"You like what you see, huh?" said Eris, flashing a knowing smile at the excitement plainly written all over my face. "Glad I got them ready for just this occasion."

"So, two people per motorbike?"

"That's right. I had the seats modified to accommodate more than one rider. With our magic stats, all four of us can ride them. They also come equipped with automatic balance stabilizers, so they'll never fall over."

"Can I ride one?"

"By all means. I couldn't possibly say no to a face so full of eagerness."

"Yes!"

We decided that Eris and I would drive first. Roxy would ride with me, and Memil with Eris.

"Excuse me," Roxy said politely as she sat behind me and wrapped her hands around my waist.

It was a closer fit than I thought.

Come on, Fate... I told myself. Concentrate on the driving now. The driving.

When we were settled in, Eris looked over at us. "Well then, let's head off to Hausen."

"All right. I'm right behind you."

When I fed magic into the handlebars, the motorbike's tires moved. I started slow, but as I got used to how it handled, I fed more energy into the motorcycle.

"Whoa! This thing is fast!" I said.

"The wind feels so nice!" said Roxy.

Our bikes roared onward in pursuit of Shin, whose presence Eris had felt somewhere near Hausen. Myne would have to be somewhere nearby. If she really was trying to open the Door to Distant Lands, then it was up to us to stop her. According to Luna, we still had time, because the changes to the world had only just begun.

Even if it meant fighting Myne herself, we had to close the Door. What exactly that would mean for all of us, I still didn't know. I had a suspicion that by the time I found out, it would already be too late.

Side Story:
Of Memil and Fate

THE COUP D'ÉTAT BEGAN in the Military District in an attempt to overthrow the kingdom of Seifort. My stepbrother, Rafale, was the mastermind behind it. I don't remember much of what happened after he imprisoned me, and in fact, I only learned many of the details of what happened from others after it was all over.

Everything started when we left together for the mountainous city of Tenburn. We received word that an extremely rare ore had been discovered in a Vlerick family facility operating in the region. Rafale was particularly excited by the news.

The original plan was for all three of us to go to Tenburn, but our brother Hado stayed behind. He had been assigned the task of hunting down a lich that had appeared in the Goblin Grasslands. I don't like to think very much about what happened to Hado after that. He was murdered for crimes he'd committed in the shadows, and later he became one of Rafale's twisted experiments.

Tenburn was home to a set of ruins located deep underground, very much like those found in Galia. We'd heard that much of what was uncovered there had been well-protected over long years due to being hidden beneath the earth. The relics were in good condition, and with a little effort, they would still work.

When we arrived at the ruins, we proceeded down a gaping tunnel that had been dug deep into the earth. It was so deep that I imagined it might lead us into hell itself. We followed one of the site workers, walking through the darkness by the light of our lamps.

What we found in those ruins were blood-red crystals, each about the size of a person. It felt like we had entered some kind of sacred space. A chill of fear ran down my spine, and I hid behind Rafale.

"Memil, this behavior is unacceptable for a holy knight," he said, turning to me with a sneer. "I keep telling you that you must be stronger of mind, and stronger of heart."

"I apologize…Brother."

"You may be the youngest of us, but you will not be doted on because of it. Now that I am the head of the family, things won't be as they were when our father still lived."

"I understand."

There was something frightening about my brother at the time, and my fear of him only grew after. The change began when he inherited his position as head of the family. Until then, I had never seen his face take on such a cruel cast.

Rafale taught Hado and me to be strict with our servants and underlings. It was how we impressed upon them the dignity of our holy knight status, and it was how the lower classes were to be handled. Rafale was my stepbrother, but he was trustworthy and reliable, and I looked up to him like a father. This was perhaps because my own parents had rarely spent time with me, busy as they were with their own lives and work. The kind Rafale whom I remembered was not the Rafale who came to be our family head. Once he came into the position, he at times treated me no better than his servants.

"Memil? Something wrong?" asked Rafale.

I could do little more than stare at my feet, avoiding his imperious gaze.

"No, Brother. It's nothing."

I could feel the disgust Rafale felt for me in the sigh that left his lips. He turned away from me and back toward the red crystals, illuminated by the light of the lamps.

"This…this is the Philosopher's Stone," he said. "Just as it was written in the legends! Amazing. Truly amazing. With this, I can take the next steps."

His voice echoed through the darkness, but as he put a hand to the Philosopher's Stone, a change came over him.

"Uhhh…" he gasped.

Rafale crouched down, now touching the stone with both hands. Worried, I ran over to him immediately, but…

"I don't need your help!" he barked, shoving me away with tremendous force.

I fell back, my head smashing into another Philosopher's Stone. Blood trickled from my head and pooled at my feet. What he had done was just too cruel. As I looked up, I found him glaring down at me, beyond furious.

"Why?! All it was supposed to take was a touch! Why does this always happen?! Why am I shunned and you, all of you are chosen?! Even though *I* am the head of the family, and even though it's all supposed to start here…"

"Brother…"

"Grr… Why won't this cursed Philosopher's Stone accept me?! How can I stand against those monsters in the kingdom like this?! And even if I had a deathless body…what's the point if I go insane?!"

"Brother…wh-what are you talking about?"

I couldn't make sense of his words. As he glared down at me, a sinister thought clearly crossed his mind.

"Ah, I see," he said. "So, there are other options. If I am unacceptable, then I can borrow from the power of one who is. Memil, I need your help. Lend me your strength."

Rafale's eyes flashed red, and with preternatural strength, he pinned me against the red crystal. I couldn't get away. Then he opened his mouth, and something unbelievable happened…fangs grew from his mouth. Before I could react, Rafale plunged them into my neck.

"Noooooo!" I screamed.

However much I wailed and cried, help never came. The guide who had brought us down to the crystals was paralyzed with fear. As my consciousness faded into mist, I wondered how it had all come to this.

From that day forward, I became little more than a tool for my brother. The Philosopher's Stone gave him stats well beyond the level of any normal being, as well as an inhuman ability to regenerate from injury. However, he needed my blood on a regular basis to maintain his sanity.

Time flowed on, defined by great pain and suffering. It must have been that way for months. I was locked in a white room, without any sense of the passage of time. I came to regard it as punishment for my self-centered attitude. I had only ever treated our servants with cruelty and was horrible to the people of the kingdom. Then I had plotted with the other holy knights to take their one sliver of hope—Roxy Hart of the Hart family—and send her to her doom in Galia, where the Divine Dragon roamed.

The Divine Dragon had been dormant for thousands of years. Yet for reasons unknown, it had crossed the Galian border and attacked the kingdom's army. Among those lost in the attack was none other than Roxy's father. When we realized this, we plotted to send her after him in order to rid ourselves of the Hart family once and for all. We thought we would finally be rid of her whining, and the citizens would no longer have their trusted advocate. I had believed this all to be in service to the Vlerick family name.

However, Roxy survived and returned to the Kingdom of Seifort. When I was finally freed from my confinement, I learned from Lord Aaron that Fate had killed the Divine Dragon himself to protect her. I couldn't hide my surprise. A servant of the Vlerick family…someone we had treated as worse than trash… It was preposterous to believe that such a person was capable of such strength. But not only had he proven capable of defeating the Divine Dragon, he also slew the inhuman beast that my brother had become. Then he saved my life.

After that, I became a maid, working under the command of Fate Barbatos. When he had been in the employ of the Vlerick family, I'd followed the example set by my brothers and treated him with great cruelty. I even took enjoyment in watching him writhe beneath our boots and developed a dreadful predilection for the act of torture itself. Fate had awakened it in me.

He did as he was told, and he took his torture without complaint, but in his eyes, I always saw the fiery spirit of resistance and rebellion. Seeing that brought upon a frisson of excitement that I had never known before, and it pushed me to further depravity.

In this way, Fate became someone of great interest to me. But because I knew that my brothers were always watching, I did not reveal these feelings. I went on treating Fate in the manner expected of me. It must have been unbearable for him, and it shames me to think of it now.

Fate killed both of my brothers, yet I owed him my life. He saved me from Rafale. Fate killed Hado because he had been trafficking children from the orphanage and doing unspeakable things to them. Rafale had made sure that our brother's corpse was found and subjected it to experiments involving the Philosopher's Stone. By that time, Rafale no longer saw Hado as his younger brother. Hado—transformed into a nightwalker and fueled by a hatred for Fate, based on the last vestiges of his memory—attacked him in a battle that cost the lives of a great many soldiers and holy knights.

When Fate cornered Rafale, my brother sought me out, thirsting for my blood. My consciousness briefly returned as Rafale drank from my throat. A deep sadness welled up within me in that moment. I had looked up to Rafale as a brother, only to be betrayed when he revealed his true, inhuman nature. Rafale had attempted to fight Fate, but was defeated. With defeat imminent, I felt the rumblings of the Philosopher's Stone within my brother as he lost all control.

I knew then that the power surging through Rafale would blow everything away. In the haze of my fading consciousness, I felt someone pick me up and whisk me away from the explosion. I learned later that the person who saved me then was Fate. Why he would choose to save me after all the abuse I had heaped upon him, I did not know. The thought of it made my head reel.

However, becoming an adopted member of the Barbatos family was the path to my survival. The Vlerick family had plotted to overthrow the kingdom, and I shared responsibility, having done nothing to stop it. For this reason, my execution was inevitable. However, through Aaron's efforts, the charges against me were dropped on the condition that I leave the Vlerick family forever.

Aaron didn't stop at freeing me; he also welcomed me into his own family by adopting me. At first, I didn't believe the words when he said them, but when I saw his warm smile, I began to realize that he spoke the truth. Even as an adopted child, however, I would have no power within the Barbatos family. Lord Aaron's role as my guardian was to watch over me and my new life. For this reason, I was to work at the family manor as a maid.

Aaron had one condition: that I throw away the person I once was.

"You are no longer Memil Vlerick," he said. "You live your life now as Memil Barbatos. Your work here as a maid will teach you to discard the pride and arrogance you once knew as a holy knight."

As a member of the Barbatos family, my duty would be to support Fate. I would work to atone for my crimes. With this second chance at life, I decided to perform my duties to the best of my abilities.

When Aaron brought me to the manor for the first time, my stomach churned with anxiety and my heart raced. I still wasn't used to my frilly new outfit, which probably intensified my nervousness. I wondered how I should act around Fate. When Aaron called me inside the manor, there he was, waiting for us.

Fate seemed a little tense. As soon as I saw his expression, I realized we felt the same way. But how should I address him? I felt unsure now that I was in front of him. I grew light-headed as all those thoughts and worries flitted through my mind. Finally, I resolved that because I was an adopted member of the family, I should look to him as my new brother.

“It’s nice to meet you, Brother,” I said with a smile.

Fate cringed. I wondered if I had done something wrong. But a part of me knew…though we were officially siblings, it was far too early to call each other such. I was also a maid, which meant that it was perhaps more appropriate to refer to him with the respect that reflected our positions in the household. I decided then to call him my master—my lord—and endeavored to avoid such careless mistakes again. After all, our positions were now entirely reversed, compared to when he had been a gatekeeper for the Vlerick family.

I stared at Fate in that moment, and for some reason…felt a powerful urge to bite his neck. There was no way I could get away with something like that, though.

Fate replied courteously, and after telling us he had things to attend to, he returned to his room. But I couldn’t understand what had come over me. Why did I thirst so much for his blood? It was most concerning, though Laine had already warned me about my condition.

Before being allowed to Barbatos Manor, I was subjected to a battery of tests in the Military District. It was there that Laine told me my body had changed into something no longer entirely human. Because of the Philosopher’s Stone, I had become something she described as quasi-immortal. That alone was surprising enough, but the real problem was that in order to continue living, I needed to ingest blood at regular intervals. The blood that was best for me came from those with powerful skills. As a result, I had instinctively reacted to Fate’s presence, and I could still feel that thirst pulsing through my body even though he was gone.

Stay calm, don’t panic… I thought. Keep your mind on your new duties.

“Is something wrong?” asked Aaron, seeing me shake my head to clear my stray thoughts.

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

“In that case, let’s get you started. As you can see, this is the state of the manor at present.”

I’d noticed the moment I entered. Perhaps this was a rude thing to think about those who had saved me, but their home was truly a pigsty.

“This is going to take a considerable amount of work,” I said.

“There’s one other maid. Her name is Sahara, and she’s nine. Fate saved her life a while back, actually. She wanted to repay him, so we hired her as a part-time maid. She’s off helping out at the orphanage at the moment, but I’ll introduce you when she returns.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call for me or Fate.”
Aaron then headed to his own room to resume his duties. Now that one of the five esteemed families had been eliminated, the responsibilities of the Vlerick family fell upon Aaron’s shoulders.
I went into the kitchen, deciding to make some tea for Aaron and Fate.
“Even *I* can do this much,” I giggled as I boiled water and brewed the tea.
But I understood that eventually, I would have to learn to cook. Until now, I had only ever needed to sit and wait for food to be brought to me. Aaron had mentioned he would be happy to sign me up for cooking classes, so all I had to do was learn the recipes. I felt confident that things would work out, and at least brewing tea wasn’t an issue.
When I brought the tea to Aaron’s room, his eyes lit up with joy. It was so strange… It was a feeling I thought I had forgotten long ago.
“It’s like being part of a family again…” I whispered as I left his room.
I felt that perhaps the warmth I longed for with the Vlerick family was something I might find here, in the Barbatos family.
“Well, on to the next room,” I said to myself.
I had one more pot of tea, and it was for Fate. I hadn’t been the slightest bit nervous with Aaron, and yet I found my heart pounding as I stood before Fate’s door.
Come on, Memil. You can do this…
Gathering my courage, I knocked on the door. I heard Fate’s voice and entered his room. “Pardon me,” I said. “I brought you some tea.”
“Oh, thanks. Just put it here.”
My master was sitting on his bed, cleaning his sword. I had heard that the sword had a consciousness residing within it, and that if Fate didn’t clean it every day, he would be buried in complaints and insults.
“Your sword… It has a soul?” I asked.
“Yeah, and it just so happens it’s both arrogant *and* greedy. I can’t catch a break.” Fate laughed wryly, but he seemed genuinely happy too. There was something of an awkward expression on his face as he changed the subject.
“Hey, about earlier… I know you called me ‘Brother,’ but…I’d prefer it if you called me by my name. It’s not that I hate it or anything, it’s just…I’m still not used to hearing it from you, you know?”
It was just as I had suspected. That was why he’d blanched, his nose wrinkling in distaste. I had treated him horribly in the past, and it was still difficult for him to have someone like me call him “Brother.” I had made him uncomfortable.
“My apologies. Once I had uttered the words myself, I realized their gravity. I will refer to you as ‘my lord,’ if you find that acceptable.”
“Thank you. When I’ve worked hard enough to earn your respect, I think then you can call me your brother.”
“I understand, my lord.”

I had delivered his tea, and I didn't wish to disturb him any longer. As I headed for the door, Fate spoke once more.
"I'm, uh…I'm heading to see Laine in the Military District. Would you like to come with me?"
My eyes widened. I had never imagined he would advance such an invitation.
"Laine asked me to bring you along," said Fate, explaining himself. "She wants to analyze the effects of Rafale's experiments. Also, she wants to look into this Gluttony skill of mine, and I haven't been to see her in a while."
"Understood. It would be my pleasure."
I realized then that it had been quite some time since I last visited Laine. My days had been so hectic since the announcement of my adoption into the Barbatos family. Still, it would be a good chance to ask Laine about what was happening to me. Even just looking at Fate made me want to pounce on his neck at that very instant. I realized that, if I wasn't careful, I just might. I tried desperately to push the urges down as Fate looked at me, his head tilted in curiosity.
"What's wrong?" he asked. "You're trembling…"
He probably assumed that he was intimidating me, but it wasn't that at all. It was his delicious neck. I wanted to sink my teeth into his tender, *juicy* neck. I couldn't stand it!
"You're standing too close to me!" I yelped.
"Oh. I…I'm sorry." Fate took a step back from me. I had hurt his feelings, and he looked so sullen and dejected.
"I apologize," I said. "Please don't take this the wrong way."
I had so wanted us to get off on the right foot, but my thirst for his delectable blood was making that most difficult! Fate had gone to the effort of trying to mend our relationship, and with a few harsh words, I had put even more distance between us.
The walk to the Military District was quite awkward. Laine's laboratory looked like the usual disaster area. The floor was covered in reports and research material, with barely any room for us to stand. The ever sleep-deprived Laine appeared as if out of nowhere, and in my surprise, I grabbed hold of my master.
"Uh…Memil?" he said.
"Sorry."
I let go of him, disappointed in myself for my reaction. Ever since I was little, I'd hated being startled.
Laine gave a great yawn and apologized. "My bad. Sleepless nights, you know? I remember walking through here last night, but I guess I must have fallen asleep while standing."
"Seriously? Unbelievable…" muttered my master.
With his face the portrait of disbelief, Fate began cleaning up Laine's laboratory. I couldn't stand to watch him do it alone, so I helped where I

could. As he whisked about, putting things back in their rightful places, I could tell this was something he was very used to doing.
“Thank you,” Laine said as she watched. “And…thanks in advance for next time too.”
“It shouldn’t be so hard to clean up after yourself.”
“As you can see, I’m trying my best.”
“This is your best?!”
Laine laughed. “Impressive, no?”
My lord sighed. He was powerless. Despite his complaints, he continued to clean up. That was just who he was as a person, I supposed. As I helped to carry some of the research materials, I suddenly felt a wave of light-headedness, followed by an unquenchable thirst. It was like I had been abandoned in the scorching heat of a desert, deprived of water for days. Laine noticed the change in me right away and called out. She couldn’t keep a room tidy to save her life, but when it came to her work, she never missed a beat.
“These look like signs that you need to refuel. To feed. Still, based on my earlier estimates, I wasn’t expecting to see this for at least another week…”
“I can explain…” I whispered.
I had meant to tell her about this anyway. I made sure that my master was out of earshot as I explained the situation to Laine. When I did, she put all the pieces together in an instant.
“I see. So, because of Fate’s Gluttony, there’s likely no better blood for your urges. Beyond that, the sheer number of skills he carries must make your thirst unbearable.” Inspiration flashed within Laine’s eyes as she called out to Fate. “Would you come here for a moment?”
“Is it something urgent?” he replied. “I’m still not done tidying over here.”
“Yes, it’s urgent! Memil is in serious danger.”
“Huh?! What do you mean?”
Laine looked at me with a wink. *Don’t say a word*, it seemed to say. “She needs blood. And I know that you know about her condition since the incident with her brother. But I don’t have any blood for her to drink here. At this rate, her body won’t be able to take it. We need your help.”
“It’s really serious, isn’t it? Okay. I’ll help. What do you need me to do? Where do I go to get my blood taken? Do you have a device for that?”
“There’s no time. She needs to take it directly.”
“Huh?!”
I hadn’t thought Laine would be so blunt. Fate and I both stammered in disbelief, exchanging confused glances. My master’s face was red, his expression awkward. I had to imagine I looked the same. True, I wanted his blood, but…like this, in front of people? My master looked a little worried. Before I could say anything, he spoke first.
“If she needs the blood, and it will help her, then okay.”
Then he stepped closer to me, tilting his head to the side to reveal his neck. I could no longer control my urges, and I bit into it with relish. I was like a

starved animal—as my fangs pierced his neck, I drank from the blood that flowed out. My master groaned slightly, but I could no longer stop. His voice reminded me somehow of all that time ago, when he was a tortured gatekeeper, and it tickled the almost-forgotten cruelty that lingered in my heart. In other words, drinking his blood *excited* me. I was absorbed in the feeling. It was like something that had long built up inside of me suddenly exploded.

Delicious… Oh, how delicious!

This was nothing like the blood Laine had been feeding me until now. I wanted to drink this blood forever. But soon, I realized that I was all too absorbed in these new sensations.

"Memil… Are we done? I'm getting dizzy."

"Eh?"

My master's lifeless voice brought me back to reality. His face was pale and gaunt. Laine took a closer look at him.

"You've taken too much of his blood," she tittered. "Is it really that good?"

"It's not…*that* tasty," I said.

"Oh? Really? Your face has gone all red."

"What I think of his blood is my secret!" I cried.

I was back to full health. Now that my Blood Lust was satiated, Laine began her examination of my now exhausted master and me. Then she told us that she had discovered something most interesting.

When she finished, she announced, "I discovered something that will surprise you."

"What is it?"

"By drinking Fate's blood, you actually quieted the urges of his Gluttony skill."

"Really?"

"Yes, there's no doubt. The numbers don't lie. Even better, his blood is the most effective type available to satiate your Blood Lust. Those are the conclusions of my analysis."

"So, what you're saying is…"

"As you've probably gathered, drinking Fate's blood periodically well be just as much for his sake as it will be for yours."

I couldn't believe it. Laine had just given me permission to drink my master's blood. All I needed now was *his* permission. For me, drinking blood was now as important as food and shelter. But nothing would make me happier than being able to drink my lord's mouthwatering blood. It was so good that I could drink it all day. However, my master and I had been through a lot, and our relationship was rather complicated.

"Ah, so the reason my Gluttony calmed down just now is because of…that?"

My master understood that it was good for both of us, and so he gave his permission. My heart fluttered with joy. I hadn't expected him to respond with such generosity. When he saw me trying to hold back my devilish grin, he made sure to give me a proper warning.

“But let’s make one thing clear: no drinking as much blood as you did just now. I thought I was going to die.”
“Understood, my lord. I promise to be careful.”
“And one other thing. Is my blood…really that delicious?”
He was curious because of how much I had drunk earlier. However, I was too embarrassed to simply look him in the eye and tell him how unbelievably delectable it was.
“That’s a secret!”
We all knew, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit it. I didn’t want it known that simply drinking his blood thrilled me as much as it did.
“Well, okay then…” my master said.
He never asked me about the taste of his blood again, much to my relief.
But I realized then that I was enjoying myself. It was like…I could be myself with these people in a way I never could before. That was probably why I felt that I could say the following words, knowing Fate would be too kind to turn me away:
“I’ll be counting on you next time I get thirsty.”
My master looked terribly flustered in the moment, but he managed to nod, nonetheless. We had not put the entirety of our past behind us yet, but I felt like my master and I could make things work. After being alone for so long, this made me genuinely happy. Perhaps from the very beginning, what I had truly wanted was a brother just like him.
Not long after my master and I visited Laine, he and Roxy switched bodies, and we were pulled into battle against the goblin shaman. Being with my master was something of a challenge. All these different things happened around him. I had a feeling that his Gluttony skill was at the core of it, always crying out for battle.
But most of all, I was glad that I could tell Fate how I really felt when we stood before my brother’s grave. If I hadn’t been able to tell him then, I never would have been able to join him on the journey to Hausen. Thinking about it, I realized I had grown terribly fond of him. His position was above mine, but he was adorable when you made him uncomfortable. The fact that I pushed him around to satiate the more sadistic part of myself would, however, remain my little secret. After all, it wasn’t like it affected my duties as his maid.
I turned my gaze to the couple riding next to me. My master was truly enjoying the motorcycle as he drove with Lady Roxy at his back. I knew that somewhere out there was an enemy stronger than we could imagine, and yet, in this moment, I sensed not the smallest hint of fear or apprehension in his features. He was simply staring ahead, into the horizon. I hoped I might see that far-off future in the same way he did. I felt that, if I followed him, I might reach that future as well.

Afterword

IT'S BEEN A WHILE! Lately, I feel like the years go by in a flash.

First and foremost, thank you for reading the fifth volume of *Berserk of Gluttony*. In this volume, I wanted the story's events to revolve around Fate's daily life. I wrote about Fate and Roxy's soul swap with an eye for humor. Roxy has always been the heroine of the story, but she's so often at a distance from Fate. This makes her feel like a side character sometimes. So I wanted her to strut her stuff a bit more here, and to let her cut loose, at least when she switched bodies with Fate. When I threw Aisha into the mix, there was some great synergy, and it was a lot of fun for me to write.

This volume was also a chance for Fate and Memil to grow closer. Fate being Fate, though, I have a feeling their relationship will only get stronger from here on out. Still, in the side story, I wanted readers to get a feel for Memil's point of view and how she felt about things. I wanted readers to understand that she's not really a bad person. It's just that she's…kind of a sadist, and she'll likely put Fate in more than a few worrying situations. At the same time, she plays an important role, because feeding her hunger means easing the strain of Fate's Gluttony.

Speaking of important roles, we can't forget about Fate's father, Dean, or Laine, who he kidnapped. Dean should be dead, yet he's seemingly returned as Fate's enemy? This was an idea I've had in mind since Volume One. However, I wasn't sure where to have it happen, so I've held back until now. I was going mad thinking about where to have Dean appear, but now I feel like it was good timing. I really hope you feel excited thinking about how Fate will act when he crosses swords with Dean.

Laine has also become an important character in the story's events. Was she kidnapped by Dean because of her research into Galian artifacts…? It's a mystery for now, but all will become clear as the story develops. Just know that Dean and Laine play important roles when it comes to Fate's destiny.

As we come to the end of Volume Five, Fate has begun his journey to find Myne. He's traveling in a party with Roxy, Eris, and Memil. Fate's always been something of a lone wolf, and he's not used to traveling with so many people. Let's not forget, he's also just one young man among three young women. Can he hold his own and stand up for himself? Or will he drown in panic and nervous anxiety? You'll just have to wait and see!

Daisuke Takino is still working hard on the comic version of *Berserk of Gluttony*. As of this writing, the third volume of the manga will release alongside the fifth volume of the light novel. If you're interested, please check it out! Myne is on the cover, and she looks adorable. As for what you can expect in the manga, it gets to about the halfway point of the second volume of the light novel. It's a battle-heavy story, and the illustrations really capture the force and energy of the fights.

Finally, I want to thank my editor for helping me get the book ready for publication, and fame for the awesome illustrations.
In Volume Six, I intend to get deeper into Fate and Roxy’s relationship. I’m looking forward to writing to you all again then!

Creator Profiles

STORYISSHIKI ICHIKA

You’ll se more of Fate’s companions in this volume than any other so far. I hope you enjoy the back and forth between all the characters, and of course, Roxy too.

ILLUSTRATIONSFAME

Soda water without sugar is gross!

Seven Seas